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THE PRODUCTION OF "STUDENT VOICE" AND ITS EFFECTS ON ACADEMIA

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Abstract

In recent years, rating and ranking practices have proliferated, from Uber to Airbnb, from PISA to dating apps, guiding consumer opinions and preferences in a landscape of supposed choices. This thesis is centred on one such rating and ranking practice: the UK National Student Survey (NSS) which, purportedly, ascertains student voice by gathering final year student satisfaction with university courses. The NSS has had a profound impact on UK academia through its influence on university rankings and government certifications of "teaching excellence". By pitching universities against one another, so the story goes, courses will surely improve their "quality" and offer better "value for money". Drawing on data from interviews, unstructured observations and insider narrative accounts, this thesis investigates the effects of the National Student Survey (NSS) on university lecturers, departments and universities. First, the NSS is shown to be a disciplinary technology through exposing lecturers to panoptical observations and perpetual judgements. Moreover, the NSS embodies what Foucault called neo-liberal governmentality by creating an environment in which competition becomes the predominant mode of social relation. As a result, lecturers, departments and institutions are recast into disciplined and competitive subjects who are "free" to find innovative ways to raise student satisfaction scores. Simultaneously, the NSS governs academia by drawing powerful boundaries. This process of boundary formation is explored through Laclau's work on antagonism where lecturer identities emerge through their rejection of "the demanding and dissatisfied student". This amalgam of disciplinary, neo-liberal and antagonistic logics then results in an increasing atomisation of lecturers. Last, DeLanda's "assemblage theory" and Barad's agential realism seek to provide a distinctly realist take on the NSS. Notably, Laclau's and Barad's works do not only open possibilities of analysing antagonistic relations between students and lecturers, but could also be read as a manual on how to create connectivities between stakeholders.

Abbreviations

AL: Associate Lecturer

DfB: Department for Business

ECB: European Central Bank

HEI: Higher Education Institution

IMF: International Monetary Fund

L: Lecturer

NSS: National Student Survey

OfS: Office for Students

SL: Senior Lecturer

SET: Student Evaluation of Teaching

SRM: Student Representative Meeting

TE: Teacher Education

TEF: Teaching Excellence Framework

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Chapter 1 Introduction

"Charlie Brooker's 'Nosedive' begins with protagonist Lacie who is on her early morning jog in what appears to be a shiny, spotless neighbourhood. Whilst being fully immersed into her mobile phone, Lacie only looks up when another group of joggers passes by. What happens now is crucial for this episode. Upon greeting each other, both Lacie and the joggers swipe their thumbs over their mobile phones: Lacie and the joggers just rated each other on a scale between 1 and 5 stars.

This rating activity builds the backbone of the episode since each rating adds to an overall score for each person. The score, in return, materialises next to people's heads whenever they are gazed at (which is made possible through special augmented-reality contact lenses that almost everyone within this fictitious world seems to be wearing).

This aggregate score has wide-ranging implications, an issue which becomes increasingly clear as the episode progresses: low scores will deny (whilst high scores will enable) people entry to workplaces, attractive housing, high-quality rental cars, and flights. A particularly low score even results in incarceration.

When Lacie, with a current score of 4.2, is searching for a new rented flat, she is informed that she qualifies for a rent discount if she manages to attain a score of 4.5. However, Lacie is informed that the only way she can attain this score quickly enough is if she manages to secure five-star ratings from other high-ranking people. On the other hand, rankings from her inner circle of friends, as she is told, are simply not powerful enough as these friends would be 'largely, pardon the term, mid – to low-range folks' (Brooker, 12:50). In other words, people with high scores have more power to affect the ratings of others than people with low scores.

Suddenly, an opportunity arises for Lacie to multiply her score when a former classmate asks her to be her maid of honour: Lacie's friend has an increasingly high score and so do most of the people who are invited to the wedding. However, when Lacie arrives at the airport to fly to the wedding venue, she is informed that her flight is cancelled and briefly loses her temper and starts to swear. Immediately, a security guard appears and deducts one whole point from her overall score which automatically bans Lacie from flying and restricts her to low-quality car rentals. From here onwards, things spiral out of control as Lacie desperately tries to travel to the wedding venue by whichever means possible …"

(My plot description)

Charlie Brooker's science fiction short film Nosedive (2016) takes what is a common practice today – to rate the satisfaction with products and services - to the next level. In this dystopian vision of the future, we are confronted with a society in which humans perpetually rate and rank one another on their mobile phones. These ratings then accrue to an average which is visible everywhere: on social media accounts, at airports or simply when looking at other people through one's obligatory augmented-reality contact lenses. Whereas the technology in

Nosedive currently only exists in prototypical experimental designs - for example, there are patents pertaining to augmented reality contact lenses (Bolton, 2016) – reciprocal rating and ranking practices are already ubiquitous in today's society. For example, when purchasing a taxi ride with the company Uber, both customers and taxi drivers rate each other on the experience of their shared car journey, with anxiety-inducing effects on both clients and drivers (Hunt, 2016). In addition, on the hospitality website "Airbnb", guests rate their hosts on whether they were satisfied with their accommodation whilst the same hosts retaliate by rating their guests on whether they, for example, abided by the house rules and left the apartment tidy (Porges, 2016). Similarly, the accumulative rating scores in Nosedive are already embodied in "Amazon ratings", "Facebook Likes" and "YouTube hits" with a range of third-party companies offering advice on how to increase ratings (e.g. Social Pressence, 2018).

This thesis explores another example of such rating and ranking practice; the National Student Survey (NSS), a UK wide Likert-type satisfaction questionnaire (Cocksedge and Taylor, 2013) which seeks to ascertain "student course satisfaction". Akin to the reciprocal ranking in Nosedive, lecturers continue to "rate" their students' academic performance in assignments whilst students now rate their courses using the National Student Survey (NSS). These ratings accrue to an overall mean score, which, in return, informs where universities are placed in national rankings (Turnbull, 2018).

The impact of the NSS has been profound. Not only has the NSS had a powerful impact on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Agnew et al., 2016), but also on lecturers (Jones et al., 2014). This impact has been exacerbated by the 2016 introduction of the UK Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which utilises NSS data to then allocate a 'gold, silver or bronze award' to 'participating higher education providers' (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2017:online). These TEF ratings, in return, may allow English universities to raise their tuition fees in lines with inflation (ibid.). Beyond the TEF, the NSS also influences higher education rankings, such as the Times/Sunday

Times "Good University Guide", the Complete University Guide (Jobbins et al., 2008) and the Guardian University Guide (Friedberg, 2016). Whilst the impact of these rankings on student university choice is unclear (Locke, 2011, 2014), university senior leadership increasingly pays close attention to trends in student satisfaction (Agnew et al., 2016). As this thesis will show, vice chancellors - eager to boost their universities' ranking position - now dedicate increasing energy (and funds) to the attainment of high student satisfaction ratings. As a result, many universities have implemented a range of smaller-scale intra-institutional Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) (Canning, 2017b) which put departments, courses and lecturers under pressure to attain student satisfaction which either exceeds or at least matches institutional averages. Hence, many lecturers have prioritised the attainment of positive student feedback with detrimental emotional effects if feedback is negative. In one of my research diary entries (see page 86) I remark:

> *"I feel like I'm continuously thinking about student satisfaction. This really is at the heart of what I do. I'm worried that I might attain negative student feedback, downhearted when I receive negative feedback and thrilled when I receive positive feedback. Feedback has strong currency; it is an attractive social good and sought after commodity. I shape my teaching on the basis of what I and my department think produces positive feedback and discard every aspect that the students might not like. I feel like I permanently dance to the hymn sheet of student voice."*
> *(My research diary)*

This thesis argues that the philosophy which underpins the NSS could be described as distinctly "neoliberal" because of its embracing of "competitive markets". By creating competition between universities over "customers" (i.e. students), so the neoliberal story goes, the quality of commodities (i.e. courses) is enhanced because customers purportedly always chose the "best", most suitable "commodity" with the lowest price (cf. Brown, 2015). The NSS seeks to create such a competitive market by forcing universities to compete with one another over ranking positions in league tables (Jobbins et al., 2008). Since these positions supposedly attract higher student numbers and better "talent" (cf. Locke, 2014), universities improve their "services" on offer

with the intention of raising satisfaction ratings. More students, in return, mean more revenue. Whether this artificial competition really raises standards remains doubtful, with some studies suggesting that the NSS contributes to grade inflation whilst decreasing the quality of education and transforming students into passive consumers of education who "deserve a degree because they paid for it". Nevertheless, due to competitive pressures to raise student satisfaction, university management force courses and ultimately lecturers to raise student satisfaction.

How can these processes be explored further? In this thesis, I propose four theoretical frameworks to shed further light on these issues: (i) Foucault's work on disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) and neo-liberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008); (ii) Laclau's notion of "antagonism" (Laclau, 2005); (iii) Manuel DeLanda's "assemblage theory" (DeLanda, 2006); and (iv) Karen Barad's "agential realism" (Barad, 2007). First, I argue that the NSS could be understood as a "disciplinary technology" which subjects universities, departments and lecturers to what Foucault (1977) described as "panopticism" and "normalising judgements". "Panopticism" refers to the phenomenon that people are more likely to be compliant if they think they might be watched whereas "normalising judgment" specifies that this compliance can be achieved when people are ranked against one another. Accordingly, NSS results are clearly visible online for everyone to see (i.e. panopticism) and universities are ranked against one another (i.e. normalising judgement).

In addition, I suggest that the NSS also utilises what Foucault referred to as 'neo-liberal governmentality' (Foucault, 2008:117). That is, the NSS governs by *"competitising"* the academic sector through pitching universities against universities, departments against departments and lecturers against lecturers over comparatively "better" student feedback ratings. As a result, and put bluntly, university lecturers are less likely to step out of line because they are busy competing with other lecturers over student feedback.

As both disciplinary and neo-liberal governmentality appear to operate within the NSS, I suggest that the NSS constitutes a "hybrid" in which discipline and neo-liberalism have "amalgamated". This "neo-liberal-disciplinary governmentality" is not only inherent in the NSS but also symptomatic of a wider societal trend of increasingly prevalent rating and ranking practices.

In addition, I hypothesise that a third governmentality operates through the NSS which I termed "antagonistic governmentality". The notion of antagonism (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014) suggests that strong group identities emerge when the group's members commonly oppose something else. This opposition creates an "antagonistic frontier" (a boundary separating the people from the opposing force). For example, through their shared opposition to my teaching style, students may find common ground to construct their own group identity. At a larger level, lecturers may resent their students for their perceived power with an antagonistic frontier separating the former from the latter. I argue that this resentment is fostered by the NSS since it pitches university lecturers against students in that students are increasingly seen as the "enemy", i.e. as the "demanding and never satisfied customer". Since "antagonisms" govern people – just like "discipline" and "neo-liberalism" do - I propose the neologism "antagonistic governmentality" as inspired by Foucault's notion of governmentality. Because lecturers are at some level too busy resenting their students, they do not notice any larger forces at play (e.g. the NSS) and are hence "governed". This type of governmentality is captured in the Roman saying "Dīvide et īmpera" (Divide and rule).

Importantly, antagonisms *usually* create connections. That is, through their common opposition (i.e. antagonism) of students, lecturers *should* feel "more connected" to their colleagues. However, precisely because in the NSS "antagonism" operates alongside those other logics of "competition" and "discipline", lecturers fail to form strong bonds between one another. Put more precisely, student feedback makes antagonism emerge, but solidary connectivity between lecturers is prevented through their competition with their peers. As a

result, lecturers become isolated. The NSS could hence be described as a "disciplinary-neo-liberal-antagonistic" amalgam, a new type of hybrid governmentality which exceeds the sum of its parts.

A useful theory to systematise this novel amalgam is DeLanda's (2006) "assemblage theory". DeLanda argues that assemblages may exist at varying levels of scale (from the microscopic to the macroscopic), may be ephemeral or long-lasting, and may span social and natural phenomena. All assemblages have in common that they consist of component parts which interact with one another. In this respect, the NSS could be understood as a national (i.e. macro) assemblage which consists of various (meso) "component parts", such as universities, student populations and rankings. These component parts now interact in specific ways with one another. More specifically, the interactions are more *competitive* between universities and *disciplinary* between students and universities. The strongest feature of assemblage theory is that it explains how universities have reconfigured internally through the NSS. For example, many universities have now implemented internal surveys which did not exist before the NSS was established. These Internal Surveys, in return, enforce certain relations between their respective component parts (e.g. modules, students, managers) which are, yet again, competitive (between modules) and disciplinary (between students and modules). This, in return, reconfigures modules internally: for instance, module leaders now put lecturers under scrutiny to raise better student feedback and lecturers start to compete with one another over student feedback. Lecturers – themselves "assemblages" - are at the receiving end of this process and become disciplined, competitised and resentful (towards students).

As already implied, this NSS induced subject formation (i.e. the emergence of a disciplined, competitive and antagonistic university lecturer) also goes alongside the drawing of powerful *boundaries*. This process – i.e. this simultaneous subject and boundary formation - can be alternatively understood through *Karen Barad's* agential realism.

Karen Barad's work argues that all boundaries and matter (in the universe) "co-emerge" through what Barad describes as *"intra-action"* (in lieu of the more common notion of interaction). That is, entities (such as lecturers and students) *ontologically* do not pre-exist their encounters, but rather emerge through these encounters. Since these encounters are, yet again, parts of a "competitised" higher education landscape and of hierarchical university management structures, I suggest that not only lecturers, but also courses and universities increasingly "materialise" as anxious "subjects". This materialisation importantly goes alongside a boundary embodied in the increasing resentment of students due to their perceived (rating) power. Barad's framework makes it possible to explore this coexistence of identity and boundary which exists in a "double-state" of rejection and contingency; lecturers reject students because they have so much power, yet they are also increasingly contingent on students' ratings for these ratings may, in fact, make or break their professional careers.

1.1   Research Questions

As captured in this brief introduction, this thesis seeks to explore the following research question: "What are the effects of the National Student Survey (NSS) on university lecturers, departments and universities?" Based on this research question, this thesis aims

1. to explore and theorise the workings of the National Student Survey (NSS) at two UK universities which includes the aim of understanding how these accountability structures affect university lecturers' experience of their practice;

2. to explore some of the ways in which lecturer agency can be theorised and promoted, and how student evaluations of teaching are symptomatic of larger societal and global developments; and

3. to explore the workings of the NSS through a range of disparate theoretical frameworks (i.e. Foucault's "Governmentality", Laclau's "Postmarxism", DeLanda's "Assemblage Theory" and

Barad's "Agential Realism") including the possibility of combining these frameworks into one larger theoretical framework.

1.2 Overview of Chapters

To address both research question and aims, this thesis will be structured as follows. Whilst Chapter 1 hitherto introduced the thesis, Chapter 2 will provide a brief literature review of the NSS in particular and of Student Evaluations of Teaching more generally. This will also entail the compilation of various themes which permeate the critical literature on the NSS. Based on the literature, it will be suggested that (i) the NSS may not actually measure student satisfaction accurately, (ii) quantitative comparisons between universities are inherently flawed, (iii) the NSS has detrimental effects on students' education, (iv) the NSS may maintain gender inequality, and (v) the NSS may foster problematic pedagogical techniques.

Chapter 3 then outlines the methodological considerations of this thesis. This includes an overview of the paradigmatic "realist" considerations which underpin this thesis, including the role of language in this. Next, an overview of the research methods is provided whilst data collection methods (i.e. the "free association narrative interviews", research diaries and observations) will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of how data analysis was approached. This data analysis section also includes a description of how the theme of student voice first emerged. Last, important research notions such as reflexivity and ethics are discussed.

Chapter 4 considers the National Student Survey in the context of Foucault's work on discipline (Foucault, 1977) and neo-liberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008, 2009). First, it will be argued that the NSS operates as a "discipline", a notion which Foucault developed in his work on the history of penal practices (Foucault, 1977). Disciplines com-

prise "hierarchical observation" (panopticism) and "normalising judgement". More specifically, "*hierarchical observation*" describes a unidirectional process of observation, famously embodied in Jeremy Bentham's prison design of the "Panopticon" in which prison guards can see their prisoners but the prisoners are not able to see these prison guards. Due to this "panoptical gaze", prisoners assume that they are constantly being watched which makes them conform to the behavioural expectations of the prison. "*Normalising judgement*" describes how people become more compliant when they are ranked against one another on a scale. Both techniques have the effect that humans become "compliant" and simultaneously "productive". Based on this, this chapter suggests that the NSS (and associated student feedback systems) use (i) hierarchical panoptic observation in that they put lecturers under continuous perceived student observation and (ii) normalising judgement because student feedback systems allow for the ranking of universities, departments and lecturers. Importantly, this utilisation of students' panoptical gaze is complex and facilitated by the pyramidal power structure comprising government bodies and university management. That is, akin to Foucault's idea of the prison director hierarchically observing the prison guards who, in return, observe the prisoners, the NSS contains various smaller enfolded accountability mechanisms such as Internal Surveys and Student Representative Meetings (SRMs) which allow university management to rank faculties, for deans to rank programmes and for module leaders to rank lecturers. Thus, lecturers, departments and universities can never be quite sure who will be gazing at their position within these rankings and, hence, must assume that someone gazes at them continuously. As a result, lecturers, departments and universities become compliant in trying to improve their student ratings.

The second section of this chapter then utilises Foucault's later work by suggesting that the NSS also functions as a neo-liberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008). To understand Foucault's work on neo-liberalism (hyphen use intended), this section firstly begins with a short detour to introduce the notion of neoliberalism more generally. Next

Foucault's work on liberal (Foucault, 2009) and neo-liberal govern-mentality (Foucault, 2008) is introduced and subsequently utilised to analyse the workings of the NSS. It will be suggested that the NSS exhibits both liberal logics (in its espousing of a contrived understand-ing of freedom) and neo-liberal logics (i.e. in its valorisation of compet-itive markets). It is suggested that this may cause the emergence of subjects which must compete with one another *in all realms* of social practice (and not just in monetary ones). Importantly, this "creation of desire" and "competitisation" *governs* the (academic) population. Put crudely, if people are busy competing with other people, they are less likely to constitute a threat against those in power. This section is then followed by a theorisation of competitions in popular culture, including a discussion of situations of "ultimate competition", most starkly em-bodied in Kinji Fukasaku's film "Battle Royale" where competition is enforced over nothing less than mere *survival*. This ultimate competi-tive situation will then be compared to people's situation under neolib-eralism. It will be highlighted that both share similarities in their artificial and enforced creation of competition and their utilisation of the logic of survival. That is, both in Battle Royale and in neoliberalism, people who refuse to stay competitive are cast into precarious and potentially life-threatening situations (cf. Brown, 2015).

Lastly, this chapter suggests that the NSS and its associated rank-ings could be best understood when figuring Foucault's disciplines and neoliberal governmentality in their entanglement. Returning to Charlie Brooker's Nosedive as presented in the beginning of this thesis, rank-ing and rating practices will be displayed as an increasingly ubiquitous technology which amalgamates discipline and neoliberal forms of gov-ernmentality. Poignantly, a new governmental technology akin to Nosedive is currently being trialled in China in which citizens gain so-cial credit points awarded by other citizens (Hvistendahl, 2017).

Chapter 5 will then shift the theoretical focus from Foucault's discus-sion towards Laclau's "Postmarxist" framework. In particular, Laclau's notion of "antagonism" is utilised. Antagonism describes the process

by which a group finds its own identity based on its shared rejection of another person or group. Laclau's work, importantly, opens the possibility to hypothesise that the NSS functions as what I will call an "antagonistic technology" in which students may develop their group identity by rejecting their lecturer and lecturers may develop a group identity by rejecting students. In short, the NSS generates antagonisms between various university stakeholders. For example, it will be argued that through the NSS, lecturers begin to see their students as antagonistic forces. This, in return, creates a boundary (which Laclau calls an "antagonistic frontier") separating lecturers from students. It will be argued that lecturers, departments and universities are not only disciplined and competitised, but are also put into a position in which they see students as the "enemy". It will be suggested that the most crucial "side-effect" of this process is that those in power become increasingly "unintelligible" as the root of the problem. That is, akin to the logic of neo-liberal governmentality which makes lecturers less likely to challenge the status quo because they are too busy competing with one another, "antagonisms" make lecturers less likely to challenge the status quo because they are too busy resenting students for their perceived power. In short, not only does the NSS utilise disciplinary and neo-liberal governmentalities, but also an "antagonistic governmentality" which governs the academic population through the artificial creation of antagonisms. Importantly, it is precisely through the analogous working of competition and antagonism that a curious form of antagonism emerges: whilst antagonisms usually create connections through their common opposition of another entity – i.e. lecturers *should* feel "more connected" to their colleagues because they reject students – this connection is prevented because lecturers are simultaneously in "competition" with one another. This technology, hence, systematically undermines attempts of solidarity between students and lecturers, and also makes it less likely that those in power (such as policymakers or the "ruling elite") are constructed as the "culprits" behind certain unmet demands. The NSS in this sense operates akin to the Roman saying, "Divide and Rule".

Chapter 6 is a more experimental chapter and seeks to view the NSS through two "new materialist" frameworks (Iris van der Tuin & Rick Dolphijn et al., 2010). To begin with, it further systematises the preceding theorisation of the NSS as a disciplinary, neo-liberal and antagonistic governmentality through Manuel DeLanda's (2006) "assemblage theory". It is argued that the NSS may be understood as an "assemblage". All assemblages consist of certain component parts (e.g. the NSS comprises universities, student populations, an infrastructure) whilst these component part interact with one another in specific ways. For example, interactions between universities are more competitive (they are guided by neo-liberal governmentality) and those between students and universities more disciplinary (they are guided by disciplinary governmentality). It is then shown how DeLanda's framework is useful when exploring how the NSS *affects its component parts* (such as universities or students). That is, through the NSS, universities (as assemblages themselves) reconfigure internally. This again has a knock-on effect on how even smaller assemblages (courses, modules, and lecturers) change their respective identities. One advantage of assemblage theory is that enables a conceptualisation of, for example, universities, countries, groups, or persons as fully fledged material entities whose properties are not reducible to the properties of their parts. That is, a university could be understood as an actor (with a certain capacity for decision-making) as much as an individual person could. Yet, assemblage theory is simultaneously able to acknowledge some of the profound complexities which may exist *inside* entities. For instance, both a university and a person may have complex *internal* mechanisms and are simultaneously part of complex *external* ones.

Next, Karen Barad's groundbreaking framework of "agential realism" is utilised to build a more general perspective on how the NSS makes *boundaries* between stakeholders emerge. Pivotal to Barad's understanding of boundary formation is her notion of "intra-action" and the "agential cut". Intra-action postulates that no entity in the universe

pre-exists its encounter with other entities but rather (ontologically) *emerges* as part of this encounter. In short, entities "matter" (used in the dual sense of "materialising" and being of "significance"). Just as two atoms may "matter" (materialise) through their intra-action, two humans "matter (materialise) through theirs. Before their intra-actions, these atoms and humans quite literally did not have any "shape". That is, rather this "shape" was produced through what Barad calls the *"agential cut"*. Put differently, when two entities emerge through their intra-action, the agential cut is that which separates them from one another. Importantly, this agential cut is a strange type of cut - not a cut with scissors (which cuts a pre-existing object into half), but a constitutive cut which separates objects from subjects by making them emerge in the first place. (Barad uses the expression "cutting together-apart".) Without this cut, again, there would be no matter. In addition, when intra-actions become iterative (repetitive), their associated agential cuts can materialise into powerful boundaries. On this basis, it will then be suggested that the NSS does not only govern the academic population through discipline, competition and antagonism, but that Barad's framework opens an alternative view on how identities and boundaries *always* emerge simultaneously. Similar to DeLanda (and going beyond Butler), these identities, however, do not necessarily have to be individual humans (such as lecturers), but could comprise departments, universities or lecturer populations. Alongside this, the NSS promotes iterative processes of "worrying" inside lecturers' minds which are then enfolded into larger-scale "intra-actions" such as encounters with students, Student Representative Meetings (SRMs), Internal Surveys and ultimately the NSS. Barad's notion of intra-action is then discussed in the context of "shared agency" and solidarity. In short, if it is true that there are no inherent boundaries in the universe, but that all boundaries (and their associated bodies) emerge as part of intra-action (Barad, 2007), an individual human body is as much of a possibility as a "body of the people" (e.g. a body of demonstrators, a lecturer body, a country body).

Last, this chapter will discuss some resonances between DeLanda's (2006) and Barad's (2007) frameworks whilst arguing for a combined version of both. This version takes DeLanda's understanding of issues of "scale" (e.g. that a nation-state is bigger than an organisation) and combines it with Barad's understanding of "topology" which, for her, revolves around the question where entities form connections and boundaries with each other. For instance, a topological phenomenon is captured in that an organisation may be competing (i.e. it may form connectivity and a simultaneous boundary with) another organisation in a different country, thereby traversing national boundaries.

After this "new materialist" analysis of the NSS, a "paradigmatic interlude" will first discuss the implications of Barad's theoretical work on methodological issues. Subsequently, certain limitations in Barad's work are outlined.

Chapter 7 attempts to bring the three main theoretical frameworks of this thesis into conversation with one another by attempting to read these 'through one another' (Barad, 2007:142). This theorisation will look at the ways in which Laclau's, Barad's and Foucault's frameworks resonate with one another whilst also paying attention to their differences. First, Barad and Foucault's work are compared. It will be suggested that Barad failed to acknowledge Foucault's lecture series on governmentality (Foucault, 2008, 2009) and it is, therefore, argued that governmentality could be conceptualised as one specific "type" of intra-action. Next, Foucault and Laclau's works are discussed where I deepen my proposition that antagonism does not only comprise a distinct social operational principle, but rather could be instrumentalised towards governing a population. In short, as already suggested in Chapter 5, the NSS could be described as an "antagonistic governmentality". Lastly, some striking parallels between Laclau's and Barad's work are elucidated. In summary, it will be argued that intra-action is a theoretical concept that can accommodate and subsume other concepts such as Foucault's notion of governmentality, which in

turn then comprises four governmentalities: sovereign governmentality, disciplinary governmentality (Foucault, 1977), neo-liberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008) and, as a novel contribution, antagonistic governmentality (Laclau, 2005). The NSS could therefore be understood as an "antagonistic (Laclau), disciplinary (Foucault), neo-liberal (Foucault) assemblage (DeLanda) of bodily production (Barad)". It will be argued that it is through intra-action of these distinct governmentalities that lecturers (i) become increasingly resentful towards students whilst (ii) simultaneously being less likely to discern larger scale issues, such as the NSS, as the source of their unmet demands (cf. antagonism); (iii) compete with other lecturers over student feedback (neo-liberalism); and, if this competition fails to raise positive student feedback, lecturers (iv) may be subjected to more fine-grained disciplinary practices (cf. discipline).

Chapter 8 is the conclusion of this thesis. Here, a summary of the thesis is provided. Next, a short section focusses on the future of student feedback. After, broader national and global trends are considered since these largest-scale developments influence (or will influence) humanity globally (including university lecturers). To sketch out these global developments, Thomas Piketty's seminal work on the dynamics of capital accumulation is utilised. This will then build the backdrop against which I will discuss some of the difficulties of subverting neoliberal national technologies such as the NSS. It will be argued that any local instances of resistance are severely limited (Srnicek and Williams, 2016). For example, if one university decided not to play the neoliberal game of student satisfaction, the market pressures of having to attract students would nevertheless remain intact. Likewise, if a country refused to play the neoliberal game of "investor satisfaction", the market pressures of attracting capital would still remain operational. Hence, according to Srnicek and Williams (2006), the only feasible option may be the implementation of a strategic econology of institutions which seeks to repurpose exacerbating automation so as

to provide an alternative to some worrying contemporary political trends.

Chapter 2   Literature Review: The National Student Survey

This chapter provides a literature review of the NSS. First, the NSS is outlined; second, the academic literature will be reviewed; and last some existing academic lines of critique will be synthesised into categories.

Whilst more generally the NSS could be described as a 'national feedback survey' (Ashby et al., 2011:5) or even more broadly as a type of Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) (Cheng and Marsh, 2010), the NSS's official website advertises it as a UK 'high-profile census' directed at undergraduate students in their final year of study (Ipsos MORI, 2006, online). In the NSS, students are encouraged to 'provide honest feedback on what it has been like to study on their course at their institution' (Ipsos MORI, 2018a:online). In other words, the NSS gathers 'feedback from final-year university students about their satisfaction with their course' (Cheng and Marsh, 2010). Importantly, the NSS has equivalents in other countries, such as 'the Australian course evaluation questionnaire (CEQ)' (Kane et al., 2008:136); the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2009); or the Center for Higher Education (CHE) University Ranking in Germany (Center for Higher Education, 2017).

The NSS was first implemented in 2005 (Ipsos MORI, 2018b) and 'all publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are mandated to participate annually' (Cheng and Marsh, 2010:694). Whilst in 2018 the NSS was open for 16 weeks and running from '8th January to 30th April 2018', in 2017, 'out of 357 institutions' almost three million students (i.e. 70% of students) completed it (Ipsos MORI, 2018a:online). Ipsos MORI, the multinational corporation paid by the UK Government to run the survey, claims that all responses in the survey 'remain strictly anonymous' (Ipsos MORI, 2018b:online).

Regarding the actual questionnaire, 27 questions form part of a 'Likert-style (1 good, 5 poor) questionnaire' and enquire into 'eight aspects of the student experience' (Cocksedge and Taylor, 20

13:e1638). These comprise (i) 'teaching', (ii) 'learning opportunities', (iii) 'assessment and feedback', (iv) 'academic support', (v) 'organisation and management', (vi) 'learning resources', (vii) 'learning community', (viii) 'student voice' and 'overall satisfaction' (Ipsos Mori, 2017:online). In addition, a qualitative element is added by allowing students to 'make positive and/or negative comments in an open-ended question' (Ipsos MORI, 2018a). Table 1 displays an example of the questions asked in the 2018 NSS.

Table 1: The National Student Survey 2018

'National Student Survey 2017 - Core Questionnaire

Scale:

Definitely agree

Mostly agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Mostly disagree

Definitely disagree

Not applicable

Questions:

The teaching on my course

1. Staff are good at explaining things.

2. Staff have made the subject interesting.

3. The course is intellectually stimulating.

4. My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.

Learning opportunities

5. My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth.

6. My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics.

7. My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt.

Assessment and feedback

8. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.

9. Marking and assessment has been fair.

10. Feedback on my work has been timely.

11. I have received helpful comments on my work.

Academic support

12. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.

13. I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course.

14. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my course.

Organisation and management

15. The course is well organised and running smoothly.

16. The timetable works efficiently for me.

17. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.

Learning resources

18. The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well.

19. The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well.

20. I have been able to access course-specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to.

Learning community

21. I feel part of a community of staff and students.

22. I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course.

Student voice

23. I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course.

24. Staff value students' views and opinions about the course.

25. It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on.

26. The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.

> Overall satisfaction
>
> 27. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.'
>
> (Ipsos Mori, 2017:online)

2.1 A Map of the Academic Literature on the National Student Survey

Turning to the academic literature published on the NSS, a Scopus (Scopus, 2018) search yielded N=88 results[1]. Whilst those contributions which take a more critical stance towards the NSS (N=18) will be presented in section 2.6, it is striking that the majority of articles not only are uncritical towards the NSS, but have in common that they investigate how to *improve* student feedback (N=70). Within this branch, the largest subsection explores the question of how to improve student satisfaction (N=23) with the NSS section of "Assessment and Feedback", an area where universities persistently fail to achieve high scores (Pokorny and Pickford, 2010; Wong, 2010; Barker, 2011; Mendes et al., 2011; Handley and Williams, 2011; Appleton, 2012; Marriott and Teoh, 2012; Wong and Beaumont, 2012; Wong et al., 2012; Crook et al., 2012; Blair et al., 2013; Laryea, 2013; Munro and Hollingworth, 2014; Voelkel and Mello, 2014; Maggs, 2014; O'Donovan et al., 2016; Pitt and Norton, 2017; Stannard and Mann, 2017; Tuck, 2017). In this literature, it is, for example, suggested that an appropriate strategy to improve assessment feedback is to give audio-recorded feedback instead of written feedback (Chew, 2014); that emotional reactions to assignment feedback are responsible for

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1 This Scopus search comprised the phrase "National Student Survey", searched only within "titles, keywords and abstracts" and was conducted on the 13 March 2018 which resulted in 101 document results. After deleting duplicates, this number reduced to 95. A range of papers utilised a 'National Student Survey' different from the UK National Student Survey and therefore needed to be excluded from consideration (Eckhardt, 1971a, 1971b; Ge et al., 2001; Nuño-Gutiérrez et al., 2005; Jenkins et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2017). This reduced the literature to be reviewed to 88 results.

students refusing to act upon formative feedback (Pitt and Norton, 2017); or that "sugar-coated" feedback may result in worse end-of-year test scores and, therefore, a lower satisfaction with assessment (To, 2016). Other examples of this branch of the literature centre on questions such as how to improve library services to gain better student feedback (Atkinson, 2016; Lewis and Little, 2016), which aspects of courses produce the best NSS results (Bell and Brooks, 2018), or what students "really want" from a degree (Hiles, 2016).

In addition, certain literature is particularly pertinent to the research aims of this thesis (see section 1.1) since it uses language which could be described as distinctly "neoliberal". That is, these articles appear to espouse neoliberal concepts (see section 4.2.1), such as *"competition"* or *"customer satisfaction"* and investigate how student loyalty could be predicted by student feedback so as to retain students in a *"competitive environment"* (Fernandes et al., 2013). They explore how Erasmus students fail to get a voice despite being the main "customers" of the university (Bogain, 2012), and how to more effectively rank and compare courses (Barefoot et al., 2016). Another (library specific) selection of articles advocates "*service* standards" for libraries to improve student feedback (Stanley and Knowles, 2016) or explore how to make libraries more effective in order to improve *"customer satisfaction"* (Atkinson, 2016). Adding to this, two papers appear to follow what could be described as a distinctly "managerialist" agenda (Deem, 1998; cf. Ball, 2003). For example, these articles advocate *"spot checks"* of formative assignment feedback to students so that the quality of feedback can be monitored (Horner, 2010) or argue that alternative student feedback technologies should be explored to enhance *"performance management"* (Appleton, 2012).

2.2 *Intra-institutional Feedback Systems*

Due to the pressures emanating from the NSS, many universities have implemented further *internal student feedback systems* which allow for

a more frequent assessment of student satisfaction at the level of individual component parts of courses (such as modules). Canning (2017a:522) suggests that universities implemented these internal systems to 'pre-empt issues which may impact in their NSS scores'. For example, since 2015, the University of Bristol has been carrying out the 'annual internal University survey' for all non-final year undergraduate students (University of Bristol, 2017:online); at University College London (UCL), 'second year undergraduate students complete the UCL Student Experience Survey, an Internal Survey with National Student Survey-style questions' (University College London, 2018:online). Lastly, at Newcastle University (2018:online) students complete two surveys: (i) 'module evaluations' in which students should evaluate each module through an externally sourced system "EvaSys" (Achievability, 2018) and (ii) 'stage evaluations' in which all schools are mandated to evaluate their undergraduate programmes. Similarly, the universities described in this thesis implemented variations of *Internal Surveys* which were closely modelled on the NSS and allowed courses to be assessed biannually in each year group: my institution implemented the "Internal Student Survey" (ISS) whereas for Reddish University (in order to guarantee confidentiality) I will simply use the terminology "Internal Survey". In addition, both my institution and Reddish University prescribed frequent meetings with student representatives of cohort groups to gauge more personalised and detailed student feedback. In other words, whilst internal questionnaires explored the feedback for modules, SRMs could ascertain student satisfaction more frequently and at an even smaller level of scale (i.e. with individual lecturers).

2.3 The NSS as a Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET)

SRMs, Internal Surveys and the NSS fall under the umbrella term of Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) (Cheng and Marsh, 2010). More specifically, the NSS could be understood as a "national SET"

which allows for both universities and courses to be compared. Similarly, Internal Surveys could be understood as intra-institutional SETs which allow for a comparison of "modules" (Reddish University) or "units" (my university), courses and faculties. Likewise, SRMs are intra-institutional SETs which allow for the assessment of individual lecturers. This thesis uses the following terminology: Internal Surveys refer to any university-wide surveys (which are often modelled on the NSS). Any departmental student feedback systems will be referred to SRMs. Utilising the sociological distinction between "macro", "meso" and "micro" (e.g. Ritzer, 2018), it could be suggested that the NSS is a macro SET, Internal Surveys are meso SETs and Student Representative Meetings (SRMs) are micro SETs. (Figure 1 provides a visualisation of these variously scaled SETs.)
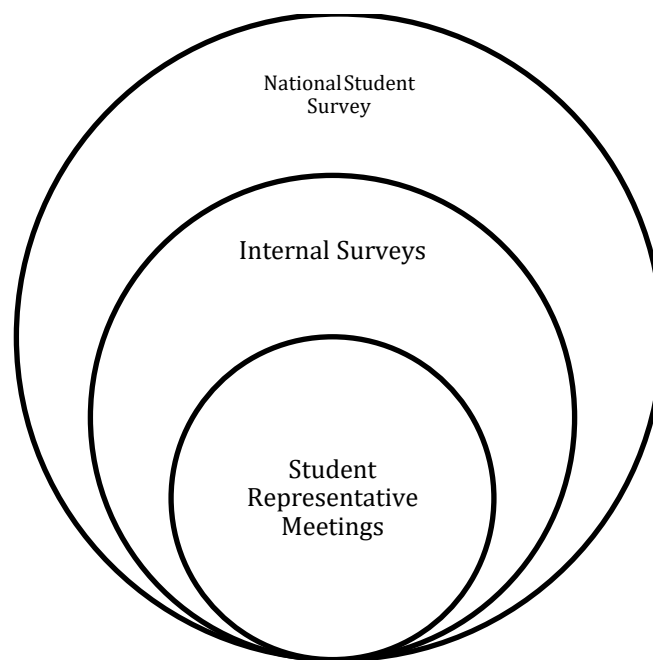
Figure 1: Student Evaluations of Teaching at varying levels of scale

Whilst an insightful overview of the peer-reviewed literature on SETs is provided by Spooren et al. (2013), to arrive at an independent

survey of the academic literature on SETs, a Scopus search[2] was conducted which yielded too many results to be meaningfully evaluated. Hence, in what follows, all 2018 results are presented to get an idea of research tendencies and the scope of areas of interest. Interestingly, as with the research on the NSS, a large proportion of articles share that they either implicitly or explicitly focus on how to avoid low and foster high SET results. For instance, studies discuss which aspects of degrees make students recommend courses (Ang et al., 2018); highlight the positive impact of play pedagogies on SET outcomes (Absi et al., 2018); suggest that students are more likely to complete SETs when they are given a specific time and place to for their completion (Young et al., 2018); argue that both "swapping from paper to online evaluations" and "changing the label of the evaluations" have a negative effect on SET scores (Zipser and Mincieli, 2018); assert that faculty training has a positive effect on "teaching effectiveness" (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018). Further studies question whether 'synchronous online administration' increases SET response rates (Standish et al., 2018:812); assert that students who perceive their marking to be fair rate their lecturers highly (Tripp et al., 2018); or argue that student attendance predicts positive student feed-back (Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko, 2018).

Further studies focus on student characteristics and SET out-comes. These studies discuss that certain student characteristics pro-mote excellent SET scores in nursing degrees (Cho et al., 2018); and that students who fail to respond to online surveys share distinctive underlying characteristics (Thielsch et al., 2018). Yet another section of studies investigates the validity and reliability of new prototypes of SETs (e.g. Nemec et al., 2018). A further study explores which type of lecturer trusts or rejects the validity of SETs (Hammer et al., 2018:online).

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[2] More specifically, this Scopus search contained the keywords "Student Evaluation* of Teaching" and was conducted on 14/06/2018, searching within "titles, keywords and abstracts". This search yielded 607 results.

The remainder of studies focuses on somewhat idiosyncratic is-sues, such as the discrepancies between student and staff percep-tions of teaching quality (Cain et al., 2018); which aspects of student feedback are accepted or rejected by staff (Mariano et al., 2018); or the operation of SETs in the context of online learning (Gómez-Rey et al., 2018). Further slightly more critical studies argue that qualitative course evaluation tools ought to complement the quantitative main-stream (Steyn et al., 2018) or explore the proportion of dental school leaders using student evaluations of teaching for annual reviews (Reinke et al., 2018).

2.4 The Impact of the NSS on UK Rankings

Crucial for this thesis, NSS scores find their expression in a range of UK rankings published in the popular press, such as the 'The Times & Sunday Times Good University Guide, the Guardian University Guide and the Complete University Guide' (Turnbull, 2018:7). Importantly, all three rankings have in common that 'the weighting given to National Student Survey data is higher than for other metrics' (p. 20). For ex-ample, the Guardian University Guide utilises NSS results alongside other sources, such as value-added measures; student-staff ratios; ex-penditure per student; entry scores or career prospects (Hiely-Rayner, 2016). After standardisation of each score, the weighting of the NSS is 25%. Similarly, "The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide" utilises NSS scores (but only the categories "student experi-ence" and "teaching quality") alongside 'entry qualifications; student : staff ratio; completion; degree classifications; graduate careers; re-search quality; services and facilities spend per student' (Turnbull, 2018:20; converted from table into text). Lastly, the "Complete Univer-sity Guide" incorporates 'the average score for all questions in the [NSS], except those relating to "learning resources"' (p. 20). This is used alongside 'entry qualifications; student satisfaction; student : staff ratio; completion; degree classifications; graduate careers; research

quality; research intensity; academic services spend per student; [and] facilities spend per student' (p. 20).

2.5   The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

In addition, the NSS is given further prominence through the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Introduced in 2016, there are currently 295 providers who hold a TEF award with associated ratings being 'judged by an independent panel of students, academics and other experts' (Office for Students, 2018, OfS, online). Whilst the TEF only judges undergraduate provision, according to the OfS[3], the TEF is important because, 'students invest significant amounts of time and money in higher education, and should expect a high-quality academic experience' (for a critical exploration of this see section 4.2.3). The OfS (2018:online) furthermore asserts that the TEF intends to help 'prospective students to choose where to study' and to encourage 'providers to work with their students to identify, pursue and maintain excellence'. Awards stay valid for a maximum of three years, unless providers choose to reapply on a yearly basis (ibid.). Whilst Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales can participate on a voluntary basis, in England participation is only voluntary for universities with fewer than 500 students (ibid.).

The OfS (2018:online) suggests that universities must 'meet rigorous national quality requirements for higher education' to take part in the TEF whilst the TEF supposedly 'measures excellence in addition to these requirements'. TEF ratings are classified as follows. Universities are awarded 'gold for delivering consistently outstanding teaching, learning and outcomes for its students' which is the 'highest quality found in the UK' (ibid). Silver is awarded to universities 'for delivering high quality teaching, learning and outcomes' which 'consistently ex-

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[3] The OfS replaced the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2018.

ceeds [sic] rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education' (ibid.). Bronze ratings are awarded for 'delivering teaching, learning and outcomes for its students that meet rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education' (ibid.). Lastly, 'provisional awards are given to participating providers that meet national quality requirements, but do not yet have sufficient data to be fully assessed' (ibid.).

The TEF awards are judged against 'ten criteria that cover teaching quality, learning environment and student outcomes' (Office for Students, 2018, online). The data utilised covers 'evidence from national data as well as written evidence submitted by the provider', such as (i) 'continuation rates'; (ii) *student satisfaction* and (iii) employment and further study outcomes (ibid; emphasis added). Supposedly, 'the context of each provider and differences in students' backgrounds, entry qualifications and subjects studied' are taken into account when determining the TEF classification (ibid.). Importantly, the TEF affects the capacity of English (but not Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh) universities to set tuition fees. That is, 'providers in England with a TEF award may increase tuition fees in line with inflation for 2018-19, capped at £9,250 per year' (ibid.).

2.6 Lines of Critique on the NSS, SETs and Rankings

This section seeks to provide an overview of the academic literature which takes a critical stance on the NSS, in particular, and SETs, more generally. Overall, the literature on the NSS was least critical, with a slightly higher percentage of journal articles critically exploring SETs. In what follows, the critical literature has been coded into themes, based on broad similarities.

2.6.1 Grade Inflation and Course Deflation.

A good selection of the literature has focussed on the lack of validity of national SETs by critically interrogating the correlation between

higher grades and higher SET results (Brockx et al., 2011). That is, since SETs occupy a prominent status on the agenda of universities, they may lead to more lenient grading, and, in return, grade inflation (Redding, 1998; Eiszler, 2002; Ellis et al., 2003; Campbell et al., 2005; Langbein, 2008; Oleinik, 2009; Crumbley et al., 2010; Ewing, 2012; Spooren et al., 2013) as well as course quality deflation (Bok, 2009). More specifically, Crumbley et al. (2010:187) suggest that (i) lecturers tend to give better grades in the hope that they achieve better student feedback and (ii) lecturers tend to make courses easier so that they become more "enjoyable", thus making them less academically rigorous. This, in return, produces teaching methods akin to 'the unethical practices of executives "cooking their books"' (p. 187). That is,

> 'whether consciously or not, many faculty do pander to students in terms of rigor and grades in order to influence SET results.' (Zimmerman, 2002, cited in Crumbley et al., 2010:188)

Importantly, Shapiro (2002, cited in Crumbley et al., 2010:187) suggests,

> 'students often use the threat of giving their professors low SET scores and will complain about the professor's teaching effectiveness in an to [sic] attempt to intimidate the professor to accept late assignments, sloppy work, and all forms of excuses and laziness' (Shapiro, 2002, cited in Crumbley et al., 2010:187)

This resonates with the following data excerpt:

> *"I just had to give one of my students a really bad mark. It was, indeed, a disastrous essay. I now hope that the student won't give me negative student feedback in the student rep meetings or internal surveys just to sort of take "revenge" on those bad marks." [Excerpt 1. My research Journal]*

Turning to the NSS, grade inflation and course deflation become particularly problematic in professional degrees with high stakes. For example, in nursing degrees, standards may be compromised by the NSS rather than improved (Higginson, 2016). The article suggests that rather than producing satisfied nursing students, degrees ought to focus on how to educate competent nurses who offer excellent patient care with profound relevant technical knowledge (ibid.). For example,

a 'student nurse [may] be entirely happy with, for example, their course, their university building, personal tutor, [but] not be clinically competent' (p. 562). Thus, 'the NSS tells us more about a university's ability to perform well in satisfaction surveys than it does about the quality about what happens within them' (Higginson, 2016:562).

2.6.2 Issues of Interpretation and Validity

A number of studies have also explored issues with the interpretation of NSS questions as well as the overall validity of the NSS. For example, Mendes et al. (2011) interrogate student interpretations of the NSS question, "Feedback on my work has been prompt", and suggest that students may have a rather ambiguous understanding of what "prompt" may mean. The question, therefore, is whether student feedback may truly capture the actual promptness of the feedback. Unfortunately, in what could be considered a slightly defeatist position, Mendes et al. (2011:42) conclude that 'it may be timely to revisit, rethink and re-imagine pedagogy' because

> 'due to higher tuition fees, students may expect a clearer articulation of what the teaching and learning offer is and, by extension, value for money. They may expect to be taught in a more explicit way than that experienced in the traditional art and design studio.'

Similarly, Bates et al. (2017) question whether the NSS can truly capture the 'holistic perspective of the student experience' (p. 2) with one interviewed student complaining about the fact that the NSS questions were rather 'ambiguous' (p. 10). It is suggested that an alternative conceptualisation of student feedback is warranted in which 'student satisfaction is best conceptualised as simply being the outcome of complex and multi-dimensional experiences' rather than a straightforward "satisfaction" (Bates et al., 2017:2). However, despite this vaguely critical tone regarding the shortcomings of the NSS, the article concludes by advocating more 'effective institutional marketing' (p. 10).

In addition, Ashby et al. (2011:22) focus on another hermeneutical issue. In (Open University) courses, a significant number of students chose '"Neither agree nor disagree" [when they] should strictly have chosen "Not applicable" on certain questions' (ibid.). Since the category of 'neither agree nor disagree' is counted as an item of dissatisfaction, this misunderstanding may have a distorting impact on where (Open University) courses are placed within rankings (ibid.). Similarly, Orr et al. (2014) discuss how Art and Design students give comparably negative feedback on their courses which could be attributed to questions being too generic and not applicable to the distinct style of learning on Art and Design courses. One interviewed student argues, for example, that lecturers 'don't spit it out for you but they get you to think' which can sometimes 'be frustrating because when they're not telling you the answer because there is no answer' (p. 34). Even though this article, again, finishes with an increasingly conformist demand for a more "objective" approach to Art and Design studio education, the argument that NSS questions may simply fail to capture the specific pedagogy on certain degrees is pertinent. This opens up questions of whether the NSS may embody a more general bias against the social sciences and humanities whilst favouring university disciplines in which testable knowledge is at the forefront. More specifically, it could be suggested that it is a pedagogical tendency of the "critical social sciences" to favour student-led sense-making and critical exploration through debate over what could be termed a "transmission model of education" which operates through "teacher-led teaching styles" aimed at "testable student outcomes". The critical social sciences may therefore be disadvantaged by the NSS.

Another category of the critical literature investigates the validity of student opinions in Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs). For example, it is argued that SETs are problematic without a 'clear theory of effective teaching' (Spooren et al., 2013:603). Various SETs currently in use consequentially may 'lack any evidence of "content validity"' and thus may 'fail to measure what they claim to measure'

(Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009, cited in Spooren et al., 2013:603). There-fore, 'a clear understanding of effective teaching is a pre-requisite for the construction of SET instruments' (Spooren et al. 2013:603). Other research suggests that lecturers' physical appearance and perceived attractiveness have an impact on the outcome of student evaluations of teaching (Campbell et al., 2005): if students think the lecturer is "good-looking", student evaluations of teaching will be better and vice versa (also see Hamermesh and Parker, 2005; Riniolo et al., 2006). Further characteristics may also influence student evaluations of teaching such as 'academic ranks, and the use of humour' (Constand et al., 2018:166) or gender (Boring, 2017).

In conclusion, seminal research by Cheng and Marsh (2010) could be mobilised to argue that the NSS is only a mildly reliable assessment tool because minimal differences in results between universities may have a big influence on university rankings. Therefore, the NSS as an appropriate assessment tool to inform student choice is questionable (Cheng and Marsh, 2010).

2.6.3 Marketisation, Managerialisation and the Student as Cus-tomer

A significant body of work has critiqued SETS in the context of the ongoing "marketisation of higher education" (Jones-Devitt and Samiei, 2011; Molesworth et al., 2011; Tuck, 2017) which will more broadly be theorised in section 4.2 in the context of neoliberalism (cf. Grimmett et al., 2009; McGettigan, 2013; Giroux, 2014). For example, McGettigan (2013:55) suggests that the NSS, and resultant rankings, intend to put 'consumer pressures' on universities to improve quality and offer 'value for money', whilst value could refer to 'both "cheap and cheerful" and "expensive but worth it" (p. 55). Likewise, a further study outlines the competitive pressures which are created by the NSS, such as the need of universities to focus on scores to attain a favourable position in the "higher education market" (Jurkowitsch et al., 2006; Bates et al., 2017). Likewise, Naidoo and Williams (2014b:1) suggest that the NSS

recasts students into consumers which erodes the idea that universities are a public good. This reconfiguration leads to a range of effects, such as a reduction of the quality of course provision (by, for example, learners becoming '…passive and instrumental…' (p.12)) as well as teaching becoming less innovative (also see Naidoo and Williams, 2014a). Another study critiques that SETs treat 'the student as a customer' as well as measuring 'the satisfaction of the student with his or her professor, and not learning' (Crumbley et al., 2010:188). Similarly, Furedi (2011:2) focusses on this transformation of students into consumers by arguing that neoliberalism 'recast[s] the relationship between academics and students along the model of a service provider and customer' where 'the customer is always right [and] the university had better listen to the student' (p. 3). This recasting of students forces 'institutions to compete against one another for resources and funding' (ibid.). In this context, Parker (2014:236) argues that the NSS promotes competition amongst staff with particular pressures being put on (female) middle management. Managers are now obliged to respond to NSS results (and expect their staff to) whilst being aware of those results' limitations.

Moreover, SETs could also be situated in the context of what has been described as 'new managerialism'. New managerialism refers to a leadership type which utilises certain techniques that are more typical for 'medium and large "for profit" businesses' and transfers these 'onto public sector and voluntary organisations' (Deem, 1998). Intra-institutionally, new managerialism may comprise the

> 'use of internal cost centres, the fostering of competition between employees, the marketisation of public sector services and the monitoring of efficiency and effectiveness through measurement of outcomes and individual staff performances.' (p. 50)

Consequentially, SETs are experienced as a 'tyranny of the evaluation form' (Spooren et al., 2013:600) since 'such evaluations are used for performance reviews and promotion and tenure decisions' despite 'the inherent shortcomings of ratings' (Constand et al., 2018; also see Simpson and Siguaw, 2000).

Before finishing, Robinson's (2013) critique of rankings shall be considered. Robinson cautions against the corrosive effects of higher education rankings on university quality. Whilst likening university rankings to the effects of biological determinism on human intelligence, Robinson (2013:65) asserts that

> 'university rankings serve to reduce the complexity of an institution's achievements and practices to a simple ordinal scale that cannot in any real sense claim to be a valid indicator of quality.'

In other words, what 'makes a good university simply cannot be accurately captured statistically' (p. 65). Moreover, rankings do not determine the quality of an institution, but how wealthy a university is. For example, wealthy universities are able to attract the best staff, can afford lower staff-student ratios. Therefore, rankings may simply recycle existing perceptions of the quality of universities instead of measuring the quality of education. Based on this, Robinson asserts that it is an illusion that universities can be meaningfully compared to one another quantitatively:

> 'The quality of the education and free inquiry that takes place within an institution cannot be easily or accurately parsed, quantified, ordered and compared. *Quality higher education is not a singular product or outcome subject to one simple definition or numerical score.* It has to do with a diverse range of activities and processes. Rankings require that these complex aspects of a university be reduced to a number no matter how absurd the exercise becomes.' (p. 65; emphasis added)

Whilst these lines of critique will be revisited in the chapters to come (for example, the issue of marketisation of education will be explored in section 4.2), the following conclusions can be drawn based on the critical literature explored:

1. The NSS may not actually measure student satisfaction accurately and may be no valid indicator of the quality of education.
2. Universities cannot meaningfully be compared quantitatively.
3. The NSS and resultant rankings may have detrimental effects on the quality of education for students (e.g. in the shape of course deflation)

4. The NSS may have other pernicious effects, such as maintaining gender biases.

5. The NSS may promote pedagogies which favour rote memorisation and testable outcomes over fostering student criticality and dialogic abilities.

Against this backdrop, the legitimate question emerges why the National Student Survey enjoys such high prestige on the agenda of the UK Government and why universities allocate significant energy and funds to attain high student satisfaction.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This study is broadly situated within qualitative enquiry. It can, hence, be delineated from positivist research paradigms which attempt to statistically or experimentally control variables (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) to arrive at statistical causations or correlations. Instead, my research resonates more closely with Davies's (2008:5) broad take on ethnography

> 'as a research process based on fieldwork using a variety of mainly (but not exclusively) qualitative research techniques but including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time.'

For example, my research only used 'qualitative research techniques' and engaged 'in the lives' of researchers at Reddish University (p. 5) and my university. In addition, I engaged in the analysis of policy (e.g. Chapter 4) as well as the academic literature (e.g. Chapter 2). Yet, this study decidedly is not grounded in what could be described as an interpretivist paradigm (Cohen et al., 2007), but instead tentatively follows a realist ontology (see sections 3.1and 6.3) This ontology suggests the existence of social mechanisms which operate somewhat independently of the conceptions we have of them (even though conceptions may dramatically influence these social mechanisms). In this sense, the thesis could be broadly situated in current post-qualitative research developments which tend to be influenced by what has come to be known as the New Materialisms (Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012).

Importantly, the methodological grounding of this study has evolved as it has passed through successive stages of my investigation. Hence, this chapter constitutes a retroactive assessment of how themes and arguments emerged from an unpredictable path through successive professional encounters, policy initiatives and alternative theoretical avenues. This iterative (Crabtree and Miller, 1999) and oftentimes messy (Cook, 2009) research process was characterised by change, including the transition of an outsider research position (when

I started my PhD studentship in 2014) towards that of an insider when I became a senior-lecturer in 2016 (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

The following structural choices guide this chapter. Firstly, the paradigmatic realist orientation of this thesis is discussed, including a brief introduction to DeLanda's (2006) "social ontology" as well as Gee's (2005) take on language. Next, an overview of the research methods is provided which is separated into a discussion of data collection methods and a discussion of how data analysis was approached. This section also includes a description of how the theme of "student voice" first emerged. Last, important research notions such as reflexivity and ethics are discussed.

3.1 Paradigmatic Considerations: DeLanda's Social Ontology

First, I seek to outline my research paradigm since ontology (what researchers think *being* is like) influences epistemology (what researchers think they can *understand* about this "being") which, in return, influences methodology (cf. Lewin and Somekh, 2011). This thesis takes a tentative realist position which is inspired by Manuel DeLanda's realist social ontology (DeLanda, 2006, 2012) and, later in this thesis, Karen Barad's "Agential Realism" (see sections 6.2.1 6.4.1) (Barad, 2007). The qualifier "tentative" was chosen because any definite grounding in a specific paradigm would have made this thesis too contingent on an understanding of the respective philosophical framework. Moreover, my relationship with DeLanda's and Barad's work is not one of sole admiration, but plagued with reservations and tensions; hence, the use of "tentative" seeks to capture this ambivalence.

DeLanda's (2012) realist "social ontology" is part of his larger realist ontology. This ontology, in return, needs to be understood within his framework of "assemblage theory", heavily inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) work. It proposes one material "reality" which humans are part of, but which also goes beyond humans. Importantly, DeLanda (2006) argues that whilst this reality exists independently of human minds, in the case of a "social ontology" an addition needs to

be made: a "social reality" exists only independently of the '*contents* of …[human] minds' (2 mins 27; emphasis in original video). "Social reality" is fundamentally contingent on human minds because, in contrast to a "natural reality", "social" reality is built on those minds. In other words, if human minds ceased to exist, this would also destroy the basis of all social mechanisms operational in society, leaving behind only the specific physical infrastructure. This also relates to DeLanda's clear distinction between how social processes *really* operate (ontology) and how people understand and interpret these (epistemology). For example, the contents of peoples' minds may be "wrong" or non-existent regarding the social processes which govern their lives (i.e. people may have the wrong epistemology). This may, nevertheless, leave the actual social processes untouched (i.e. the ontology of these social processes is unaffected). In short, DeLanda asserts an 'autonomy of social entities from conceptions we have of them' (DeLanda, 2006:7). In the context of this thesis, it could, for example, be argued that lecturers' practice is shaped by student feedback in specific ways *regardless* of whether lecturers understand the distinct operational mechanisms of that feedback. Put differently, even though this thesis's analysis may be "flawed", it does not influence the fact *that* student feedback functions in specific ways and has certain effects. In other words, there are *real* 'causal interactions' which guide the operation of the NSS. (These causal interactions are, of course, seldom linear but rather complex, non-linear, reciprocal and may involve the presence of '*catalysts'* (DeLanda, 2006:20))

This assertion of an independence of a social ontology of the "contents of human minds", however, needs to be further clarified in the context of this thesis. That is, under no circumstances must the impression arise that lecturers' interpretations of the NSS and student feedback are insignificant. To the contrary, it needs to be asserted that *a* certain understanding of student feedback is not only important, but lies at the crux of student feedback systems. For example, vice chancellors need to act in accordance with the belief that the NSS significantly influences the scale and composition of student intake so that

universities put student feedback high on their agenda. Yet again, this belief operates, more or less, independently of whether student intake is *actually* affected by rankings and student feedback (cf. Locke, 2014). This means that if, on the other hand, lecturers and management did not believe in the impact of student feedback, this would also significantly reduce the effect of this very feedback inside the institution, leaving only the inter-university market pressures of the NSS rankings intact. Hence, this thesis treats the narratives of university lecturers as a crucial component part of the operation of student feedback systems. Similarly, it could be suggested that since I analysed the NSS as part of my own work environment, my emerging knowledge of the NSS affected my own behaviour when dealing with student feedback. For example, my research diary entries suggested that through my analysis of student appraisal systems, I increasingly developed an awareness of the workings of those systems. This awareness sometimes exacerbated my own compliance with student feedback (purely because of my emerging *knowledge* of the significance attributed to student feedback).

This is where Foucault's conception of ontology can be fruitfully included into my realist position. Whilst some authors have suggested that there is a certain fuzziness in Foucault's ontological convictions - particularly regarding whether what exists is real (i.e. somewhat independent of people's conceptions of the world) or postmodernist (Joseph, 2004) – this thesis suggests a realist reading of Foucault's (later genealogical) work. This reality is 'the result of social practices and struggles over truth and objectivity' (Oksala, 2010:445). Student feedback systems and lecturers, hence, are understood as entities which are part of these struggles. Building on the previous paragraph, the role which knowledge plays in these struggles is crucial in that 'knowledge does not represent reality, but has instead a productive role in shaping and configuring reality' (Olsson and Petersson, 2008:61). For example, knowledge of lecturers' performance in student feedback systems, as will be argued in Chapter 4, has an im-

portant effect on how lecturers can subsequently be governed and dis-ciplined. Knowledge also plays an important role in that an under-standing of the importance of student feedback systems influences lecturers' compliance with student demands: again, university manag-ers *must* believe that the NSS significantly influences student intake so that the NSS develops its effects on universities. Hence, this paper treats the narratives of university lecturers as a crucial component part of the operation of student feedback systems.

Language. I suggest that any paradigm (and particularly a realist paradigm) needs to ask the question which ontological status *language* is given. DeLanda, for example, theorises language as just one, but by no means the only expressive force in social reality. He thereby rejects a reality which is entirely linguistically framed. This resonates in interesting ways with James Paul Gee's "Discourse Analysis". Gee (2005:10) argues that, on the one hand language *describes* things we see, but at the same time it *creates* these things:

> 'We continually and actively build and rebuild our worlds not just through language but through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol systems, objects, tools, technolo-gies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, feeling, and believing. Sometimes what we build is quite similar to what we have built before; sometimes it is not. But language-in-action is always and everywhere an active building process.'

That is, like DeLanda, Gee attributes importance to language, but argues that this language functions in 'tandem with' non-linguistic ele-ments. Gee, therefore, distinguishes between discourses (with a lower case d) and Discourses (with an capital d): discourses refer to 'lan-guage-in-use' whilst Discourses refer to language in combination with other aspects such as 'body, clothes, gestures, actions, interactions, symbols, tools, technologies … , values, attitudes, beliefs, and emo-tions' (Gee, 2005:7). Put differently, "Discourse" refers to how lower case "discourses" are fundamentally entangled with non-linguistic '"stuff" to enact specific identities and activities' (p. 7). The productive aspects of language are captured in what Gee (2005) calls the 'seven

building tasks of language', i.e. the seven areas of reality which language helps to build (ibid.). These comprise (i) "significance" (it makes certain things significant, while making other things insignificant); (ii) "activities" (language helps to be recognised as engaging in a certain activity and not another); and (iii) 'identities' (language is used by people to build a 'certain identity or role' (p. 11)). In addition, language builds (iv) 'relationships' (language is used to build relationships with listeners and readers and with the entities we speak about); and (v) p*olitics* (in that language builds a perspective on 'social goods' understood as 'anything that a group of people believes to be a source of power, status, value, or worth' (Gee, 2005:2)). Last, language builds (vi) 'connections' (certain aspects of reality are not inherently connected, and we need to use language to create these connections); and 'sign systems and knowledge' (language can privilege one particular sign system, such as the language of lawyers) or one specific way of 'knowing and believing' (Gee, 2005:13).

3.2   *Data Collection and Data Analysis*

The research question for this thesis – i.e. "What are the effects of the National Student Survey (NSS) on university lecturers, departments and universities?" – emerged from an iterative process of (NVivo) coding of qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2007), engagement with the academic (and non-academic) literature as well as insider lived experience at a post 92 UK university. The data for this study is derived from 12 interviews with university lecturers, the majority of which were employed in education departments; observations (*cf.* Jones & Somekh 2004) of three university lecturers' teaching sessions in education; and two research diaries (one of which is autobiographical). To begin with, Table 2 gives an overview of the research participants for this thesis. As can be seen, the depth and types of data collected with these participants varied. Most of the data was collected at Reddish University in Yorkshire. More specifically, the observations of and interviews with

Max, Emily and Andrea took place predominantly in 2015/16. Max was observed three times and interviewed once; Andrea was observed five times and interviewed three times; and Emily was only observed twice and interviewed once. In addition to these combined observations and interviews, an additional series of stand-alone interviews were conducted with Stacey, Melissa, Barbara and Martin.

Table 2: Overview of participants[4]

Name	Age	Institution	Discipline	Academic Rank	Interviews	Observations	Research Diary
1. Barbara	68	Reddish University	TE	SL	1	-	-
2. Martin	32	Reddish University	TE	SL	1	-	-
3. Melissa	44	Reddish University	TE	SL	1	-	-
4. Stacey	39	Reddish University	TE	AL	1	-	-
5. Max	30	Reddish University	not TE	SL	1	3	-
6. Lisa	32	Reddish University	TE	AL / SL	3	1	Yes

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[4] SL=Senior Lecturer; L=Lecturer; TE=Teacher Education

7. Emily	37	Reddish University	TE	SL	1	2	
8. Andrea	30	Reddish University	Not TE	SL	3	5	-
9. Jonas (author)	33	A university in the North West	TE	AL / SL			Yes
10. Karl	44	Reddish University	TE	SL	1	-	-
11. Michael	42	Southhawk University	Nurse Educator	SL	1	-	-
12. Matt	35	Reddish University	TE	SL	1	-	-
13. Dimitra	42	Kings University	Philosophy	L	1	-	-

The following section will outline some of the data collection methods utilised for this thesis. First, the use of "research diaries" is outlined. Next, Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) concept of the "free association narrative interview" is discussed. Last, some remarks on "observations" are presented.

3.2.1 Data Collection

Research diaries. The majority of this thesis's data stems from Lisa's (see page 60) and my research diaries. In my research diary, I variously documented thoughts; observations; reflective comments on events; notes taken whilst teaching groups of students; reflections after teaching; and critical reflections of wider institutional, local, national or global problems. In short, my research diary contained elements of what Morrison (1995a, cited in Cohen et al., 2007)) describes as 'reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, or critical reflection'. Mostly these reflections were research related, but sometimes included observations beyond the university. The use of a research diary helped me to express preliminary 'thoughts / feelings /assumptions in the territory' (Goldbart and Hustler, 2005:18).

Particularly the reflective writing in my research diary was important for this thesis because it did not only document my research process, but also helped my analysis. It supported my ongoing practitioner research by, for example, critiquing my 'practice and some of the habitual patterns inherent within it' (Brown and Jones, 2001:175). For instance, my research diary made me aware that I felt anxious about negative student feedback after I "told off" a student who demonstrated sexist behaviour (see page 178). In addition, reflective writing also provided 'an instrument through which successive and alternative conceptions of practice [were] marked and preserved for scrutiny' (Brown and Jones, 2001:181). This made it possible to track change by comparing earlier and later versions of writing. For example, my first ever diary entry captured my strong desire to provide students with "lots of tips and tricks to become an effective teacher". Critically interrogating this excerpt two years after made me realise that I presented the terminology "effective" as an absolute term without asking the (relational) question, "Effective for whom and in relation to what?". Importantly, reflective writing may not only describe what is (or was) happening, but may be productive of how certain situations are seen. Therefore, reflective writing may 'provide a way of seeing practice in a

fresh way which in turn can lead to different ways of acting' (Brown and Jones, 2001).

Research diaries also provided me with insights into structural elements guiding institutional practice. In particular, Lisa's research diary presented itself as an invaluable glimpse into practice at an institution different from mine. This enabled me to compare practice environments. In addition, this allowed me to talk about certain aspects of practice which were also prevalent at my institution without running the risk of breaking potential confidentiality requirements. In this way, it was sometimes possible to indirectly talk about my work environment through Lisa's experience at hers.

Free association narrative interviews. In addition to research diaries, this thesis utilises interview transcripts from interviews inspired by the 'free association narrative interview method' as suggested by Hollway and Jefferson (2000:4). Characteristic of this method is that interviews should start with open questions that enable the interviewee to engage in narratives about certain past events. These narratives may well diverge from the interviewer's original questions because the aim of free association narrative interviews is to put the interviewee in a position of "simply being able to talk". This narrative approach can be delineated from other interview methods, such as 'closed quantitative interviews' or 'standardized open-ended interviews' (Patton, 1980:206). These two methods employ what could be described as an "*imposition*" strategy (by using a list of pre-prepared questions with the intention of ensuring reliability) and figure the interviewer as the person who is researching from the outside and from a position of power (Barbour and Schostak, 2005). Conversely, a narrative interview approach is akin to other interview styles, such as the 'informal conversational interview', the 'interview guide approach' (Patton, 1980:206) or 'dialogic approach[es]' in which 'people may express their views to each other and to themselves' (Barbour and Schostak, 2005:42). Often, my narrative approach functioned as a platform for a reflective and critical dialogue (ibid.). For example, my interviews usually started "open"

(and avoided overtly closed and leading questions) to elicit narratives, then attained more focus towards the end, followed by me talking about my own experiences as a lecturer in which I attempted to create critical dialogue.

Importantly, to elicit narratives, the "free association narrative interview method" suggests that both overtly specific as well as broad questions should be avoided (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Whilst a specific question may put interviewees under excessive pressure to give answers they think the interviewer wants to hear, a generic question could make interviewees feel intimidated by the multiplicity of potential answers whilst also restricting the flow of the narrative. Instead of asking 'what do you most fear?', a better question would be '"Tell me about your experiences of fear" or, better (because more specific), "Tell me about a time when you were fearful"' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000:35). If it transpires that not enough information has been given as the interview progresses, the interviewer can refer back to previous points of the interview, asking to "elaborate a little further on" these points. Applied to my work, when Martin, for example, talked about the pressures deriving from Ofsted, a follow-up question was, "You were talking about Ofsted earlier. Could you tell me about a time when you had any direct negative experiences, if you ever had any bad experiences?"

This captures that interviews are never straightforward but rather messy and complex encounters with potential ethical issues, such as participant vulnerability (Barbour and Schostak, 2005). This vulnerability is present in all types of interview situations, but particularly prevalent in, for example, investigative journalism where leaked information about key informants may constitute a matter of life and death (ibid.). Therefore, certain precautions were taken regarding the safeguarding of interview material. The actual recordings were kept on devices without access to the internet and in locked storage facilities. Transcripts were either anonymised or kept protected by passwords whilst only opened when internet access was disabled.

Importantly, free association narrative interviews take into consideration (and try to ease the effects of) a crucial phenomenon: in interview situations, participants often act as 'defended subjects' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000:23). "Defended subjects" usually refuse to tell another person how they "genuinely" feel or think right from the beginning of the interview. Rather, they attempt to hide key aspects of their thinking which they deem potentially harmful to their own identity. Importantly, this rarely is a conscious process, but may be largely unconscious. Therefore, a narrative approach to data collection not only has the advantage of making the data richer (for example by potentially bringing previously unanticipated themes to the forefront), it also incorporates a psychoanalytical dimension to what participants say. For example, there may be instances in participants' accounts which are indicative of repressed experiences (ibid.).

On this basis, each of my interviews started with a "narrative enabling" general question, with the intention of easing potential tensions and setting a vague frame for discussion for both interviewer and interviewee. This initial question would usually aim at eliciting how my participants first became university lecturers, such as "Could you tell me how you got into being a university lecturer in education?". In my earlier interviews (i.e. with Barbara, Martin, Melissa, Stacey, Max, Lisa, Emily, and Andrea), these initial questions were usually followed by questions which attempted to address the general themes of (i) "restraints in practice" (e.g. "Tell me what you are struggling with most in your job at uni") and (ii) "agency in practice" (e.g. "Have you ever had the feeling that you could really make a difference?"). Since one of my original (and since discarded) research aims was to enquire into "utopian accounts of practice", one set of questions also tried to explore what my participants would change in the general system of teacher education if they were in charge of policy. Questions therefore included, "Imagine that you were the prime minister of this country and had a vast pot of money to spend on university teacher education. What would you change?"

Importantly, I approached my interview transcripts under the assumption that 'until absolutely proven otherwise, … everyone has "good reasons' and makes "deep sense" in terms of their own socioculturally specific ways of talking' (Gee, 2005:93). Sometimes this necessitated a "back-grounding" (but not elimination) of Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) suggestions to utilise psychoanalytical theory in order to make sense of *defended subjects*. Concerning my interview transcription, I followed Gee's advice to transcribe data in such a way that it enabled points to be most eloquently made. Crucially, the process of transcription was often non-linear (Gee, 2005) with the detail of transcription depending on the purpose of the interview. Moreover, transcriptions come with a reduction of complexity (ibid.). Thus, I mainly *transcribed* the interviews into continuous text with the exception of some segments where a more detailed reading seemed beneficial. In this reading, I then used stanzas, lines and pitch glides (2005:127).

Observations. My observations could largely be categorised as "unstructured observations" in which I behaved like an "Observer Participant" (Jones and Somekh, 2004:140) who sat 'at the side or back of the room and [made] detailed notes'. Hereby, it is crucial to consider the role my 'prior knowledge and experience' played whilst engaging in these observations. For example, my perception of students behaving rudely or unprofessionally in seminars cannot be understood outside of my own value judgement of what "rude" and "unprofessional" may mean in certain contexts. Within my observations, I attempted to record key utterances verbatim (Jones and Somekh, 2004) which I afterwards anonymised, but refrained from (audio or video) recording these observations because this was not captured in my institutional ethics application. Whilst a *passive* intervening probably occurred due to my presence in the classroom, I did not *actively* intervene in these observations, with the exception of moments when I tried to listen to group conversations in which case I occasionally engaged in conversations with the students.

3.2.2 Data Analysis

This thesis conceptualises data analysis as "resonance". For example, data may resonate with a researcher (e.g. Barbara's data about student feedback somehow resonated with "me"). I suggest that data may also resonate with other data. For example, Barbara's negative perception of student feedback systems (page 60) resonated with Melissa's traumatic experience with student voice (page 62). Moreover, data may resonate with a theory or theoretical framework. For instance, the discussion of the NSS in the context of Foucault's work on governmentality (see 4.2) may ask how Foucault's ideas resonate with the data collected as part of this thesis. Theoretical frameworks may also resonate with other theoretical frameworks. For example, in Chapter 7, I will explore how Barad's (2007) work resonates with Laclau's (2005) work on populism.

This view of "analysis as resonance" is not without foundation. It itself "resonates" with a theory – that of "diffraction" as presented by Karen Barad (2007) which will be thoroughly introduced in section 6.2. Diffraction happens whenever waves immerse through one another, such as two ripples on a pond. For example, when waves travel through a "grating" (i.e. a barrier with two holes), the waves assume the shapes of two concentric circles, variously intersecting one another. This process of intersecting is called diffraction. Importantly, when waves overlap, their amplitudes (e.g. their height) may rise which Barad calls 'constructive interference' (p. 77). 'Destructive interference' (p. 77), on the other hand, describes how amplitudes may subtract from one another, with the possibility of completely cancelling one another out. It is paramount that Barad suggests that diffraction is not restricted to the domain of physics, but happens in all realms of reality, including those described as natural and those described as social. This is why she refuses to see diffraction as yet another optical metaphor - such as that of reflexivity - but as a real ongoing 'performance of the world' (p. 149). Diffraction may also be used as a methodological

tool which is capable of reading 'insights through one another' and responding 'to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter' (p. 71). Therefore, diffraction can make it possible to read theoretical frameworks and data through one another so as to arrive at points of constructive and destructive interferences.

Moving away from the notion of resonance (or diffraction), I propose that the line between data collection and data analysis is somewhat blurry. This became particularly apparent in my research diary in which I sometimes captured rather complex *analytical* points. Similarly, when interviewing, I ask whether I did not already analyse my data when I found certain contributions significant or interesting. It could be suggested that the sheer act of "finding something interesting" clearly involves the researcher (i.e. in this case myself) and his or her experiences. Similarly, when listening to recordings, the mere act "understanding" what participants were saying may already constitute "analysis" because this understanding happened through the lens of my specific knowledge (my theory) of the meanings of the words spoken (cf. Gallagher, 1992). After all, what is the difference between understanding someone's language through the theory which already resides in my mind and, on the other hand, viewing it through a specific "acknowledged" theory. I argue both involve analysis.

Similarly, the process of how the theme of the National Student Survey emerged from the data was not straightforward. Building on the notion of "resonance" above, I suggest that this theme emerged through a complex interplay of my own biography which "resonated" with the processes of data collection and the reading of (academic) texts, including literature, online videos, keynotes, conferences and conversations with friends and colleagues. Whilst a more thorough exploration of how these "resonances" could be conceptualised will be provided in my agential realist discussion in section 6.3, I will now try to retrospectively trace and re-construct the "genesis" of my thesis. This reconstruction is realised by the mobilisation of data excerpts, such as research diary entries and interview data which I attempted to provide in chronological order.

The first piece of data stems from my research diary and depicts an experience in which I first became aware of the existence of student appraisal systems within my then role as an associate lecturer (AL):

"It was approximately two months after I started to teach at university as an associate lecturer (AL), when I first became aware of student feedback systems. After one of my taught English sessions, a colleague approached and informed me that he had just had a meeting with student representatives and that they were "really happy" with my teaching. I remember feeling somewhat uplifted by this experience because I had been uncertain whether the students liked my teaching or not. This means that with regard to my own practice, I started on a positive note when it came to student voice […] [As a result of this feedback,] I also asked myself the question, "What can I do in the future to attain the same good student feedback. I believe this was the moment when I also started feeling a little trapped in my practice. That is, I wanted to continue teaching in a similar fashion so that my students would continue to experience my teaching as positive, but felt that I wouldn't want to deviate from the teaching style which affected the positive student feedback." (Excerpt 2.My Research Diary)

A subsequent "free association narrative interview" with Barbara in January 2015, displays a noteworthy contrasting take on student voice. Barbara was a retired but still research-active Reader at Reddish University with an extensive teaching, managing and research career. Before the interview, I informed her about my research interest, such as "how the global neoliberal agenda impacts on university lecturers who are active in education". Due to Barbara's longstanding experience in HEIs, I also asked her how her institution had changed during her academic career (which spanned the period from the 1970s towards the present). In addition, towards the end of interview, I enquired what she thought to be the "control mechanism" that university lecturers "suffered most under".

Barbara replied that this had to be "student voice" in that lecturers were "now constantly subjected to student appraisals" with the intention of getting the university into the "top fifty of the best-regarded universities". Barbara continued:

"[…] the most pernicious thing from my point of view, from where I sit - relatively calm these days - um, um, is the instruments … which deprofessionalise staff or [which] assume a lack of professionalism … [of] staff […]" (Excerpt 3. Interview with Barbara)

In the past, "managers [could] try and address [issues] with … staff, as individuals": "there's never been a period in all these forty years when I worked when [student appraisals have] not been significant". Barbara continued that

> "[…] the idea that [student voice] would create … league tables, you know, declaration that we've got to get in the top fifty of the best-regarded Universities in the country I find absolutely, as I say, pernicious because … [these ideas] marginalise the real conversations between staff; they make them less significant and as well as closing down the space … you alluded to earlier … in which [real conversations] can happen. So, your actual ambition to do something what you call paper-work and this other stuff and actually you have less time to have conversations. But you know in one sense there's … less interest or commitment in having a conversation around genuine philosophy, genuine pedagogy. That gets replaced by pseudo, or quasi concerns about pedagogy […]'(Excerpt 4. Interview with Barbara, 2015)

At around the same time in early 2015, I interviewed Lisa, a lecturer in education who at the time also engaged in doctoral studies in the shape of a Doctorate in Education (EdD). After the interview, due to the similarity of our research we decided to share research diary entries on an ongoing basis. To safeguard anonymity, we decided to anonymise the data so that all actors involved could, under no circumstances, be identified. The data excerpts which Lisa was willing to share with me in the three years of contact will constitute a substantial part of the following analysis. For now, one of Lisa's research diaries produced in May 2015 was significant in shaping my research interest in the NSS:

> "Recently in one of my staff meetings, the course leader suggested that if the course was unable to gain better feedback in internal surveys that the course might be shut down." (Excerpt 5. Lisa's research diary, May 2015)

Moving on, a subsequent interview with Melissa, a thirty-nine-year-old senior lecturer working in education, resonated with Barbara's and Lisa's accounts of practice. Not only did Melissa perceive student voice as a negative category, but reported on an outright traumatic experience which consisted of a student complaining "on behalf of the entire course":

"I:
If you think back at your five-year career – what's the most negative thing?
[…]
LOT'S OF LITTLE THINGS
    Stanza 1
    1a I don't know really, um, ..
    1b I don't know, I, I ..
    2   There's lots of little things that been hard ..

    RESEARCH IS HARD
    Stanza 2
    3   Research is really, really hard.
    4a Really hard to kind of take …
    4b Constantly sort of trying to get involved in research
    5a Well you know something about that yourself ..
    5b How pressurised that time becomes, um

    ACADEMIC DISAPPOINTMENTS (IN RESEARCH)
    Stanza 3
    6a And then, the usual sort of academic,
    6b Um sort of disappointments, rejections and all that.
    7a That's, um ..
    7b You get used to that.

    FEELING HELPLESS
    Stanza 4
    8a I think the really low moments are
    8b when you feel under great pressure to resolve a situation
    8c that you can't really affect [I: hum, hum]

    RELATIONSHIPS BEING BAD
    Stanza 5
    9a   So when, um ..
    9b   When relations are really seriously bad in a school
    10a Or when um ..
    10b A student is really struggling um ..

    NEGATIVELY EXPERIENCED ACCOUNTABILITY
    Stanza 6
    11a And I get that there's always a feeling
    11b There's a lot of scrutiny of what you do [I: alright]

    Stanza 7
    12a Yeah and, um,
    12b You have to constantly, sort of,
    12c Be producing sort of outcomes from situations."

(Excerpt 6. Interview with Melissa; Spring, 2015)[5]

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[5] This excerpt utilises underlined 'pitch glides' (Gee, 2005:123) and 'lines and stanzas' (p.85) because in an earlier attempt to make sense of the data I wanted to take a closer look at the characteristics of this language transcript.

Referring back to her most negative experience, Melissa then continued:

> "… the problem with the lowest moment, now I think of it, was in my first term when a student complained about me on behalf of the entire group.
> J: Oh really?
> M: Yes
> J: That must have really been quite difficult.
> M: The … term was really difficult because you make so much .. so many mistakes because I come from .. really a school situation where it's completely different .. you have no idea how everything works and to work through that was really quite difficult and it turned out that [the] student had taken it upon himself to speak for the group and they hadn't said .. you know the rest of the group didn't share that .. it was very, very hard. I think you can feel very isolated at university per se, that kind of thing, you're left, there is more thinking time, but there's also more time to kind of become self-critical I think. [yeah, I think] to sort of compound your sense of error to make sense of mistakes, systems are now nowhere near of, you're very accountable, but ways of proceeding aren't very clear cut…" (Excerpt 7. Interview with Melissa)

In short, Melissa's "lowest moment" was in her "first term when a student complained about [her] on behalf of the entire group". Even though "it turned out that the student had taken it upon herself to speak for the group" and "the rest of the group didn't share [the student's opinion, this was still] very, very hard".

This interview, at the time, *resonated* strongly with my own emerging relationship with student appraisal systems. In my research diary, I wrote that student feedback

> "compounds my own feeling of precariousness as an associate lecturer where I feel particularly vulnerable towards negative student feedback. I reasoned that if students decided to give me negative feedback, this would increase the probability that my temporary contract as an associate lecturer would not be renewed … That is, rather than my research serving as an emancipatory tool, I felt that my emerging awareness of these student appraisal systems exacerbated the constraints of my practice." (Excerpt 8. My research diary)

Whilst engaging in the iterative cycle of data collection, another distinct theme emerged: that of "problematic student behaviour". This issue of student behaviour became particularly prominent when observing Andrea and Max. *Max* was a senior lecturer at Reddish University and worked on education studies courses both at undergraduate and postgraduate level which were not part of teacher education courses. I also conducted interviews after my observations, using a strategy which

was guided by the "free association narrative interview method" described above (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). *Andrea* also worked at Reddish University within the field of secondary education as well as school-independent courses both at undergraduate and postgraduate level. As with Max, I only observed taught sessions which were school independent but this time only at undergraduate level.

Within my observations of Andrea's and Max's seminars, I increasingly perceived the behaviour of students as *problematic.* For example, students frequently failed to show up for tutorials; chatted loudly in seminars; and left seminars halfway through sessions without informing lecturers of the reasons for their early departure. At the time, I asked whether there could be a

> *"relationship between student voice and the increasingly problematic behaviour of students? That is, does the relative power which is bestowed upon students through student feedback systems lead to an stronger sense of students' entitlement." (Excerpt 9. Earlier Discarded version of Thesis)*

This also resonates with Furedi's (2011:3) claim that SETs produce a situation in which 'the university had better listen to the student' because 'the customer is always right'. This issue of "problematic student behaviour" was also captured in an informal conversation with Andrea:

> *"I spoke to Andrea today. Two of her colleagues were reprimanded by student feedback because students found the texts which they had to engage with too hard which they then reported in the feedback systems." (Excerpt 10. My research diary)*

I began to wonder whether there was a relationship between student feedback systems and problematic student behaviour. These interactions between feedback systems and student behaviour were also captured in my research diary:

> *"This confrontation with one of my students is still going through my mind. I remember he was talking loudly to his neighbour, showing her pictures on his mobile and attempting to tease her. [...] After a few unsuccessful attempts to pause and wait for the student to stop talking, I raised my voice said, "Either be QUIET or leave this seminar. This is really distracting." I remember that I felt genuinely angry with the student and could feel that my heart was beating and that I perceived my body language as quite authoritarian, even macho like. The student apologised and was, indeed, a little quieter from [then] on. After the*

session I started worrying, however, whether he might now give me negative student feedback in the future and that, as a result, my contract as an associate lecturer would not be renewed." (Excerpt 11. My research diary, 2015)

This excerpt shows that my "telling-off" of problematic student behaviour made me worry that the student might now give me negative student feedback in the future which (again as in Excerpt 8.), I was afraid, would impact on my then temporary employment situation.

Moving on, in late 2015, I was introduced to Emily whose sessions I observed twice and whom I interviewed once. In this interview, Emily acknowledged that she was still "getting to grips with the amount of creativity and freedom" she had in "determining the content of the course" while acknowledging that her work was largely determined by certain professional bodies such as the NCTL, UCET and Ofsted, as well as student voice. Emily was given management responsibilities despite having made the conscious decision to apply for jobs without these. When asked to identify the hardest aspect of her work, Emily mentioned:

"I didn't particularly anticipate ... at all … having any … responsibility in addition to having students in [my]… care and be responsible for their outcomes on the course." (Excerpt 12. Interview with Emily)

She admitted that she consciously decided, "not to be a manager any more" and that she didn't "want responsibility … for managing things". This was a conscious move "to shed management and leadership responsibilities" and a "very conscious, very self-aware decision". It was "a big surprise for" her when she was then given leadership responsibilities, and not necessarily an unwelcome or "unpleasant one at all". In fact, she "really enjoy[ed] it". Subsequently, Emily suggested, "It's all about the *student voice*."

A further interview with Stacey captured some of the issues which I will return to in Chapter 8 when discussing the effects of 'precarity' (Lopes and Dewan, 2014:28). That is, in this interview, Stacey highlighted how she was "effectively on a zero-hours contract" at Reddish University. That is, each summer she would not be paid and then be

reemployed (if there was demand) in the following autumn term. Stacey found this continuous uncertainty to be "quite draining". It also made her "feel quite underappreciated" since she could just be "discarded when they [the university] don't need any more staff". As I shared a similar situation at my institution on my then associate lecturer contract, Stacey's account made me empathise with her.

As I became increasingly interested in the question of how student feedback affected lecturer identity, my own experiential data also accumulated in my research diary. Moreover, Lisa's research diary allowed me to explore this theme further. It also is significant that alongside this process I engaged in extensive reading of various philosophical, sociological and methodological texts. For example, in 2014, I engaged with Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2005); Hermeneutics (Gallagher, 1992); Critical Theory (Bronner, 2011), in particular Habermas (1991[1962]); and Utopia (Adorno and Bloch, 1964) - whereas from 2015 onwards I started to read Discipline and Punish (Foucault, 1977) and Meeting the Universe Halfway (Barad, 2007) as well as engaging with a range of academic journal articles. I deem this significant because I argue that these texts either consciously or unconsciously influenced my research interest in the NSS. For example, Foucault's work made me wonder whether those aspects of practice which lecturers experienced as impositions may function as disciplinary technologies. Engaging with Critical Theory made me more aware of its intellectual tensions with poststructuralist theories and, up to this date, makes me wonder where I situate my own thinking. In the summer of 2018, I then decided to collect more data from further four participants to complement mine and Lisa's impressions in our research diaries. Karl (Reddish University); Matt (Reddish University); Michael (Southhawk University[6]); and Dimitra (King's University[7]). This now

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[6] Southhawk University is a "Post 92" university. For more information on clusters of universities in the UK, see
[7] King's University is a Russel Group university.

closes this rough outline of how data and "data resonances" could be reconstructed.

3.3 Reflexivity and Ethics

Reflexivity. The type of qualitative research underpinning this thesis demands an acknowledgement of what is commonly referred to as "reflexivity", especially since I was researching my own professional environment. This section will first present various takes on reflexivity to then elaborate on two versions which have influenced my own thinking and research. As a starting point, Nightingale and Crowby's suggestion is considered:

> 'Reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research.' (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999:228)

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) similarly suggest that researchers cannot take themselves out of the research process because they are always already part of the social world that they are studying. Their definitions have an even stronger focus on the importance of the interrogation of self:

> 'Reflexivity is the near-impossible adventure of making aspects of the self strange: attempting to stand back from belief and value systems and observe habitual ways of thinking and relating to others, structures of understanding ourselves, our relationship to the world, and the way we are experienced and perceived by others and their assumptions about the way that the world impinges upon them.' (Bolton, 2014:8)

> 'Reflexivity does … involve finding out about ourselves but primarily in the sense of our immersion in the historical and the social …   .' (Scott and Usher, 1996:39)

Both quotations acknowledge the iterative nature between the effects of the self on the outside world and the effects of the world on the researcher. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, cited in Cohen et al., 2007:310) similarly argue for the fundamental importance of reflexivity since (action) researchers are 'part of the social world that they are

studying'. In summary, reflexivity expects (i) a direct acknowledgement of how the researcher influences the research process and (ii) a questioning of the researcher's assumptions.

Hence, it could be suggested that it is impossible for me to "objectively" research from the outside as I am always already actively implicated in the research process and construction of my research findings. For instance, my initial research interest in how "university lecturers experience their own practice" influenced my perception of interviews, observations of practice and my own reflective comments. More specifically, since I was interested in those aspects of practice which lecturers experienced negatively, the answers given by participants somehow reinforced my own convictions that, in fact, there are certain issues with lecturers' professional lives. Similarly, (as suggested above) when interviewing Barbara, student voice became significant for me because it somehow resonated with my own positive or negative experiences with student feedback. These, in return, led to identifications with my participants' stories.

Ethics. Beyond what could be described as "standard practice" in research (in that all data has been anonymised and consent has been given by all participants for their data to be used), in this section, I would like to build on my ethical considerations so far. For example, in section 3.2, I discussed the necessity of anonymity which becomes particularly important in investigative journalism. My research situation, however, has presented itself as more complicated than this and has changed in the process of writing. I, for example, started as a full-time PhD student and a part-time "Associate Lecturer" researching into my practice as well as researching the situation of university lecturers at Reddish University. In 2016, this changed towards a more profound insider experience because this was when I started my role as a "Senior Lecturer". Therefore, my situation could be fittingly described as a hybrid of being an insider (at my institution) and an outsider (at Reddish University). Ethical problematics connected to this kind of re-

search have been considered by Floyd and Arthur (2012) who distinguish between two types of ethical dimensions: an official dimension (the ethical procedures which are prescribed by the university) and a hidden dimension (a more personal and more complex variant of ethics).

Importantly, I now find myself in a position in which I am unable to communicate all ethical decisions that I made with complete honesty. The reason for this is that my very communication of these decisions may go to the detriment of participant anonymity, including my own. In other words, certain anonymisation techniques have been employed within this thesis which cannot be explicitly named, as they would put the anonymity of participants in danger. Connected to this are significant ethical issues which are to do with my own insights as a researcher into my practice, including its practice environment. In short, research diary entries about certain team meetings, conversations with colleagues, internal policy texts crystallised as highly relevant for the research of this thesis; nevertheless, I was often unable to include these, as it would have been ethically problematic to do so. For example, there were moments when participant consent could not be obtained or when the inclusion of certain material (such as notes from team meetings) would have put me, as the practitioner researcher, into a vulnerable position because this inclusion would have violated my work contract.

Therefore, the following heuristic was followed. The overriding principle comprised the safeguarding of the anonymity of my participants. Sometimes this necessitated to change certain details within narratives, such as interviews, research diaries or observations. The second ethical principle was to change only details as much as *necessary* to maintain maximum validity. Examples, at this stage, cannot be given since these would contradict and make obsolete my attempts at safeguarding the anonymity of participants in the first place. In short, whenever I had to choose between "confidentiality" and "validity", I chose confidentiality.

The following chapter will now start the analytical process by analysing student feedback systems through Foucault's notions of "disciplinary techniques" as well as "liberal and neo-liberal governmentality".

Chapter 4 The NSS as a Disciplinary and Neo-liberal Hybrid

(Plagiarism note: Parts of this chapter have been submitted to the British Educational Research Journal)

This chapter theorises the NSS through the notion of "governmentality", a neologism which Foucault first introduced in the context of his lecture series "security, territory, population" in 1978 (Foucault, 2009). Importantly, Foucault's understanding of "governmentality" 'shifted from a precise, historically determinate sense' in the beginning of his lecture series 'to a more general and abstract meaning' towards the end (Foucault, 2009:387-388). Whilst the more 'precise, historically determinate' version of governmentality will be explored in section 4.2, its latter (more abstract) version can best be understood in its plural form, i.e. as governmentalities or 'technologies of government' (Lemke, 2002:53). Thus, Foucault's notions of the Christian pastorate (Foucault, 2009), 'sovereign power' (Foucault, 1977:48), 'disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1977:187), 'liberalism' (Foucault, 2009:48) and 'neoliberalism' (Foucault, 2008:117) can all be understood as different governmentalities, i.e. 'different technologies of government' (Lemke, 2002:53).

Building on this understanding of governmentality, this chapter theorises the NSS in the context of two governmentalities: (i) the "disciplines" (Foucault, 1977) and (ii) "(neo)liberal governmentality" (Foucault, 2008). Therefore, this chapter is structured as follows. First, Foucault's notion of disciplinary power is introduced and then utilised as an analytical framework to make sense of the NSS. Next, Foucault's concept of neoliberal governmentality is discussed and similarly applied. Last, the NSS will be discussed as a hybrid governmental technology which utilises both disciplinary and neo-liberal governmentalities.

Before beginning my analysis, the question may arise, "Why did I decide to use Foucault?" This question becomes even more pressing when considering that in the last four to five decades, Foucault has

been heavily utilised, both generally[8] (e.g. Sztulman, 1971; Guédon, 1977; Rose, 1993; Lemke, 2001; Holmes and Gastaldo, 2002; Reckwitz, 2002; Swyngedouw, 2005; Rose et al., 2006; Teo, 2018) and specifically in the field of education (e.g. Jones and Williamson, 1979; Walkerdine, 1984; Ball, 1990; Hunter, 1996; Fejes, 2011; Skourdoumbis and Gale, 2013; Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016; Mourad, 2018). In the education field itself, Foucauldian analyses are diverse, spanning fields such as education policy research (Olssen and Codd, 2004); inclusion (Graham and Slee, 2008); schooling (Youdell, 2010) (including its educational inequalities (Youdell, 2006) or gendering processes (Francis, 2006)); learning (Simons and Masschelein, 2008b); enterprise education (Peters, 2001); lifelong learning (Nicoll and Fejes, 2008) and assessment (Woolridge, 1995). In the context of higher education – as relevant for this thesis - works have explored areas such as disability (Gabel and Miskovic, 2014); government department discourses (Suspitsyna, 2012); international-isation in UK universities (Guion Akdağ and Swanson, 2017), the "en-trepreneurialisation" (Varman et al., 2011) and "responsibilisation" (Morrison, 2017) of student populations; the "Research Assessment Exercise" (later "Research Excellence Framework") (Broadhead and Howard, 1998); the governing of academic subjects (Morrissey, 2013); employability (Frauley, 2012); student engagement (Wintrup, 2017) new public management (Brunskell-Evans, 2011); student exams (Raaper, 2016), including associated "exam-markets" (Jankowski and Provezis, 2014); and what it means to be an ethical researcher (Kanchan, 2018) or a "free inquirer" (Mourad, 2018). However, no re-search has hitherto utilised Foucault to enquire into the National Stu-dent Survey.

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[8] A title-abstract-key Scopus search on 12 February 2018 yielded 11,460 results for the keyword "Foucault".

4.1 The NSS as Disciplinary Governmentality

'Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?' (Foucault, 1977:228)

To begin with, the NSS could be understood as what will be referred to as a disciplinary "governmentality", i.e. a disciplinary "technology of government". It is important to note that Foucault only started to present discipline as a specific type of governmentality in his 1978 lecture series "Security, Territory, Population" (Foucault, 2009) whilst originally – i.e. in Discipline and Punish (Foucault, 1977) – he simply used the term "discipline". This section introduces Foucault's *original* understanding of discipline (or "disciplinary power") as introduced in his Discipline and Punish (Foucault, 1977).

4.1.1 Foucault's Disciplines

According to Foucault (1977) disciplinary power progressively replaced sovereign power in the 18th and 19th century. Sovereign power could typically be found in the absolutist states of the 17th century and was, for example, captured in gruesome public executions where sovereigns sought to express their total authority over their subjects. Discipline and Punish, for instance, opens with the description of a torturous public execution for the attempted regicide of a French king in which the accused was publically tortured and killed in the most horrific way possible. Foucault then moves on to describe disciplinary power by outlining the regimented daily routine of prisoners less than a century later. What effected this sudden shift of dominant ways of the punishment of transgressions?

Importantly, according to Foucault, the reason for this shift was not that rulers suddenly started to see torture as "cruel" and "inhumane" (even though this often was the official justification). Rather, sovereign power simply failed to produce the desired effect of intimidating the public, and, instead, frequently produced riots and official challenges to monarchic power. Thus, the emerging bourgeoisie of the

18th and 19th century denounced sovereign power as cruel (and, interestingly, as an outmoded concept characteristic of the undesirable concept of monarchy) and promulgated alternative modes of punishment. Torture, hence, was replaced by public punishments from the middle of the 18th century onwards. In these types of punishments, each crime was allocated a more "measured" equivalent punishment whilst, again, the main intent was to show to the public that certain punishments were to be expected for specific crimes. Yet, these types of public punishments, again, produced unintended consequences, such as the public sympathising with the punished person. Thus, public punishments were then finally replaced by disciplinary institutions, such as hospitals, army barracks, schools, and prisons in which a new type of power was prevalent: "disciplinary power" or simply "discipline".

Importantly, according to Foucault (1977), disciplinary power is characterised by three disciplinary instruments called the *disciplines* which comprise (i) hierarchical observation, (ii) normalising judgement and (iii) examinations (ibid.). Firstly, the notion of *'hierarchical observation'* describes the effect that observation has on humans (p. 170; emphasis added): if humans think that they might be watched, they are more likely to be compliant. The principle of 'eyes that must see without being seen' (p. 171) is captured in Foucault's description of Jeremy Bentham's prison design of the Panopticon. In the Panopticon, a watchtower is situated in the centre of a circular prison building, a position from which prison guards have a clear view of the activities of the inmates. Crucially, 'venetian blinds' cover the windows of the watchtower and prevent the inmates from being able to see the activities of the prison guards (p. 201). Therefore, the prisoners can never be sure whether they are currently being watched, and, simply must assume that they are being permanently observed. This observational awareness is what Foucault calls *panopticism*, a gaze which puts the prisoners under perceived continuous surveillance and makes them comply with the behavioural expectations of the prison. As an effect, the prisoners are (1977:138) turned into 'docile bodies' that possess a certain 'docility-utility' (p. 138), i.e. human bodies that are both useful

(in that they can complete certain activities that are deemed worth-while) and docile (in that they follow orders and do not step out of line).

Importantly, the principle of hierarchical observation within the Panopticon can be extended in a pyramidal fashion, i.e. by 'supervising its own mechanisms' (p. 204). For example, in the

'central tower, the director may spy on all the employees that he has under his orders: … he will be able to judge them continuously, alter their behaviour, impose upon them the methods he thinks best; and it will even be possible to observe the director himself. An inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the Panopticon will be able to judge at a glance, without anything being concealed from him, how the entire establishment is functioning.' (Foucault, 1977:204)

Put differently, the prisoners are under hierarchical observation from the prison guards, whilst the prison guards, themselves, are under similar observation from the prison director. Importantly, this pyramidal panoptical principle can be extended further towards the workings of most institutions, with senior personnel observing "lower ranking" colleagues.

Moving on, *normalising judgement* describes the power of normalisation on the subject: people are judged 'by where their actions place them on a ranked scale that compares them to everyone else' (Gutting, 2006:84). Foucault uses the example of the 18th century École Militaire to exemplify the operation of normalising judgement. This military school was separated into classes known as 'the very good', 'the good', the 'médiocres', 'the "bad"', and 'the "shameful" class' (p. 181), each being subject to certain kinds of punishments. It was through being able to *compare* these classes to and *differentiate* them from one another; through having the capacity to *hierarchically* order them (with a *homogenising* effect); and through *excluding* certain classes by making them into the abnormal - as in the example of 'the "shameful" class of the École Militaire' (p. 183) – that normalising judgement unleashed its disciplinary effects. Importantly, only 'merit and behaviour' (p. 182) were to influence allocation to these classes. This created fluidity and allowed for discipline to emerge through punishment and rewards:

> 'discipline rewards simply by the play of awards, thus making it possible to attain higher ranks and places; it punishes by reversing this process.' (p. 181).

Lastly, Foucault suggests that the "*examination*" combines both hierarchical observation and normalising judgement. Examination is 'a normalizing gaze' (Foucault, 1977) and 'it engages [individuals] in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them' (p. 189), such as the exact documentation of who died in the army, the levels of children at school, or, in our case, the extensive documentation of every student and lecturer at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Characteristic of the examination is (i) the principle of *visibility*: whilst sovereign power exercised its power through visibility of the monarch and relative invisibility of his or her subjects, disciplinary power 'is exercised through its invisibility' whilst demanding from its subjects 'compulsory visibility' (p. 187). Moreover, the examination (ii) *individualises* those it disciplines by documenting specific characteristics of each individual subject. For example, in 'teaching establishments' it was necessary to 'define the aptitude of each individual, situate his level and his abilities' (p.189). This documentation was then used to turn an individual into (iii) a *case* that

> 'may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded.' (p. 191)

Docile bodies (i.e. compliant individualities) are now created by combining the disciplines outlined above with a meticulous specification of the *time* and the *space* in which certain bodily *movements* should be undertaken. This necessitates 'an uninterrupted, constant [supervision of] the processes of the activity rather than its result' (p.137). More specifically, Foucault (1977:167) suggests that docile bodies have (i) 'cellular', (ii) 'organic', (iii) 'genetic' and (iv) 'combinatory' characteristics. I will now delineate these characteristics more thoroughly.

Firstly, the *cellular* characteristic of a disciplined individual (i.e. a docile body) is achieved by 'distributing individuals in space' (p. 141).

Importantly, these spaces are both real (i.e. they have real manifestations) and ideal (e.g. they specify how things *should* work, be done). Cellular characteristics operate by *enclosing individuals* in certain places (such as army barracks, schools, or factories); and by allocating each individual a specific *partitioned space* which is constantly supervised and analysed. Importantly, these spaces also need to be *functional spaces* which, for example, enable effective communication; shield and document things (e.g. medicines) and people (e.g. sick patients); or ensure the 'division of the production process' and 'the fragmentation of labour power' (p. 143). Moreover, *rankings* define the position of each individual in relation to others. Therefore, in disciplinary institutions, "tables" became increasingly important (e.g. timetables, league tables). This, for the first time, made it possible to rank the individual within a multiplicity of other individualised human beings.

Secondly, the *organic* characteristic of docile bodies is achieved by specifying and supervising the activity of individuals. For example, timetables specify *when* certain activities should take place and *which rules* should be followed (e.g. no telling of jokes in the factory). In addition, gross bodily movements, the coordination of body and gestures and the way objects ought to be manipulated must be specified. For example, a marching soldier is to move his body in a certain way, at a certain time and in a certain rhythm and a pupil who is learning to write is to orient his or her body to the arm in a specific way. Moreover, docile bodies must continuously consider how to optimise the use of time. Foucault argues that the more efficient this use of time becomes, the more subjected the body becomes.

Thirdly, the *genetic* characteristic of docile bodies is achieved by implementing exercise regimes with the aim of training individuals to become increasingly docile *and* useful. In other words, there was the need to map out the "genesis" of one's career to achieve a certain future target. For example, in the military, a soldier needed continuous exercise to then prove that he was fit and skilled enough to proceed to a higher rank. At school, children must pass certain tests to be allowed to move on to the next class. Importantly,

'exercise is that technique by which one imposes on the body tasks
that are both repetitive and different, but always graduated.' (p. 161)

Fourthly, docile bodies have a *combinatory* characteristic which is achieved by specifying how individuals are supposed to *work together* (Foucault, 1977). For example, troops with rifles needed to operate like a machine with each segment functioning in a specific way relative to other segments. Each soldier, for instance, needed to know what it felt like for his fellow soldiers to be in a certain battle position. Foucault (quoting Marx) suggests that in factories the workers' bodies needed to be similarly "combined" 'in order to obtain an efficient machine' (p. 164). For example, the chronological time of one worker needed to be adjusted to the chronological time of all the other workers. Likewise, schools

'became a machine for learning, in which each pupil, each level and
each moment, if correctly combined, were permanently utilized in the
general process of teaching' (p. 165).

This also included a specific command structure with certain bells or commands triggering a whole set of reactions.

4.1.2 The NSS as Disciplinary Technology

On this theoretical basis, it is now possible to explore the distinct ways in which the National Student Survey (NSS) functions as a disciplinary technology. Before beginning, it is important to reiterate that the NSS has spawned a range of further *intra-institutional student feedback systems* which often allow for a more frequent assessment of student satisfaction at the level of individual component parts of courses, such as modules. (Figure 1 on page 32 sought to visualise this). Canning (2017b) suggests that these internal systems have been implemented to ascertain feedback *before* the NSS is conducted so as to anticipate and act upon negative student feedback. For example, Lisa's university implemented variations of these *Internal Surveys* which were closely modelled on the NSS. In these Internal Surveys, courses could be assessed at two points in the year in each cohort of students. In

addition, Lisa's university also prescribed regular meetings with student representatives to ascertain detailed personalised student feedback. In other words, in these "*Student Representative Meetings" (SRMs)* staff could assess student feedback more frequently and at an even smaller level of scale than in Internal Surveys in that SRMs could assess individual lecturers. On the other hand, at Dimitra's current university (a Russell Group university), there were no SRMs, but only individual feedback systems which examined individual lecturers.

To build a more sophisticated understanding of how student feedback operates at Reddish University, it is firstly necessary to consider student feedback systems at various scales *in isolation*.

Student Representative Meetings. Lisa's experiences with Student Representative Meetings (SRMs) shall be considered first:

> *"I looked at the minutes from the previous [SRM] and realised that my feedback wasn't as good as that of most other colleagues. I mean, I wasn't given a grade, but by reading the meetings' [notes] I could simply tell that my feedback didn't sound as good as that of others. One other colleague received even worse feedback. What I found slightly strange was that these minutes seem to always be uploaded to [the virtual learning environment] platform in the shape of a word document. In this document, you can see the overall satisfaction of each year group as judged by the student representatives on a scale from one to ten. In addition, this document also outlined for each individual group which parts of the course the students were really happy with and which parts they were not. Perhaps, I'm a little bit over-sensitive, but it stresses me out that these student rep meetings are also minuted in a document which is then freely available for download by the year groups' students, by fellow lecturers who teach on this module and by the course leaders. In other words, any student, or even worse my boss, could then look at the document and find out: oh look at Lisa's group. They really don't like her." (Excerpt 13. Lisa's research diary)*

Firstly, SRMs utilise Foucault's (1977:183) "normalising judgement" which, as mentioned above, 'compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, [and] excludes'. That is, Lisa could co*mpare* her supposed teaching quality to (and *differentiate* it from) the other lecturers who also taught on her module (who largely received better feedback). Moreover, Lisa could *hierarchise* 'the level' of individual lecturers' student feedback whilst situating her own feedback in the second last place (p. 183). Furthermore, SRMs had a homogenizing effect in that

they gave each lecturer an implicit level which dictated the 'conformity' (p. 183) to achieve positive student feedback. Fifthly, SRMs indirectly *excluded* Lisa from the rest, simply because her negative feedback could be *seen* by everyone, including her senior colleague who might decide to gaze at the document to conclude, "Look at Lisa's group. They really don't like her".

The "panoptic qualities" of SRMs (or Student Evaluations of Teaching more generally) transpire when considering that it is not so much about whether students actually observe lecturers. Rather, panopticism is created by the continual indeterminacy *whether these observations will somehow find their expression in SRM feedback (or Internal Surveys and the NSS for that matter)*. Hence, it could be postulated that SRMs operate panoptically, but in a temporally shifted fashion: it is not a matter of whether lecturers are being observed, but whether students *remember* observing their lecturers when giving their feedback. Due to this indeterminacy, lecturers must assume that all of their teaching may be remembered by students, and, as a result, lecturers become compliant with whatever they believe students want. In addition, SRM feedback is panoptic because of the way it is documented and subsequently exposed to a *later panoptical gaze*. For example, Lisa's research diary extract suggests that the minutes of SRMs are generally uploaded to a "virtual learning platform" and are, thus, there for students, colleagues and managers to "gaze at". That is, like the prisoners in the Panopticon who never know whether they are being observed at any specific time, lecturers never know if students, colleagues or senior colleagues will consult the documentation at a later point in time. This temporal dimension shifts the panoptical gaze from being one of simultaneity (in the case of the prisoners) towards being "stretched out" to a *panoptical time-window* in which there is always a theoretical chance that others might exercise their gaze.

Internal Surveys. Moving on, *Internal Surveys* exhibit partly similar, partly distinct disciplinary characteristics to SRMs. Lisa explains in her research diary that

"In the internal survey, students also judge the modules. This puts quite a lot of pressure on module leaders who are, in a way, made responsible if the score for the module dips below 80%. This happened the other day. It all started when the module leader told us in a meeting that the module dropped below 80%. He seemed agitated and identified a few lecturers who he [the module leader] thought would be responsible for this negative student feedback. Apparently, students mentioned individual lecturers in their internal surveys – even though they are directed not to. The module leader also said that in student rep meetings, students complained about the same lecturers. [The module leader] said that, as a result of the feedback, the degree leader gave them [the underperforming lecturers] a stern talking to. Another outcome of this meeting was that they arranged weekly tutorials with the module leader which they [i.e. the underperforming lecturers] had to attend." (Excerpt 14. Lisa's research diary)

The Internal Surveys at Lisa's institution exhibit similar disciplinary characteristics to the SRMs discussed previously. For example, "normalising judgement" operated in the sense that the Internal Surveys captured student feedback at the level of individual modules which then placed them 'on a ranked scale that compare[d] them to' the other modules (Gutting, 2006:84). Interestingly, when this module rating dropped below 80%, the module leader was situated 'in a network of writing' (Foucault, 1977:189) in that he had to produce an action plan which outlined how he planned to attain positive student feedback in the future. More specifically, Internal Surveys *differentiated* individual modules 'from one another' (p. 182) by establishing 'a minimal threshold' (80%) which had to be attained. When the specific module in Lisa's research diary failed to attain this threshold, it was branded 'abnormal' (p. 183), in analogy to Foucault's description of 'the "shameful" class' in 18th-century military schools (p. 182). This "shameful module", interestingly, 'only exist[ed] to disappear' (p. 182): an action plan had to be designed to outline how the "shortcomings" of the module will be addressed in the future. In other words, the module leader became disciplined through what Foucauldian scholar Ball (1990:4) refers to as 'dividing practices'.

Importantly, Lisa's description of Internal Surveys also exhibits the characteristics of Foucault's (1977) *pyramidal* functioning of hierarchical observation. As discussed above, this pyramidal structure works in that prison guards could themselves become subject to observation

by the 'prison director' (p. 204). Likewise, Lisa suggested that module leaders are under pressure to attain positive feedback for their modules in the Internal Surveys. When modules at her institution failed to achieve the threshold of 80 per cent student satisfaction, the module leader had to produce an action plan. This action plan included addressing those lecturers who the module leader judged to be responsible for the apparent reduction in student satisfaction. That is, whilst the prison director observes the 'employees that he has under his orders' (p. 204), the university module leader uses student feedback to observe the performance of individual lecturers. In comparison to the hierarchy in the Panopticon prison design, however, it could be postulated that lecturers are positioned at the bottom on the hierarchical structure of this process whilst students fulfil the panoptical gaze *on behalf of* university management. When satisfaction then fell below 80% in Lisa's example, the module leader was under pressure from his course leader to identify those individuals purportedly responsible for the student feedback by inspecting comments within Internal Surveys and SRMs. The "underperforming" lecturers were *individualised* – i.e. the module leader tried to discern these lecturers in the feedback documentation - and they were made into *cases* that 'may be described, judged, measured, compared with others' (Foucault, 1977:191). Interestingly, these "underperforming lecturers" also had to be 'trained or corrected, classified, normalised, excluded, etc.' in that a timetable was drawn up which outlined "weekly tutorials with the module leader" (ibid.). This timetable specified the specific times to discuss how precisely those lecturers ought to move their bodies in their seminars (e.g. how to speak, which exercises to engage the students in) to attain better feedback in the future.

The pyramidal functioning of power within Internal Surveys did not, however, stop at the level of module leaders. Instead, module leaders were under pressure from course leaders who, yet again, appeared to be under scrutiny from the university's senior leadership team to attain a favourable rating:

"Recently in one of my staff meetings, the course leader suggested that if the course was unable to gain better feedback in internal surveys that the course might be shut down." (Reprint of Excerpt 5. Lisa's research diary)

The National Student Survey, Popular Rankings and the TEF. Having focussed on SRMs and Internal Surveys, we will now move on to theorise the workings of the National Student Survey (NSS) through Foucault's disciplines. Firstly, the NSS utilises (1977:184) '*normalising judgement*': current final year students judge their courses on a Likert scale from one to five. This, in return, influences the standing of each university in (i) national rankings as well as (ii) whether universities are awarded gold, silver or bronze ratings in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). That is, (i) national rankings *compare* and *differentiate* university courses and universities; and they *measure* 'in quantitative terms and hierarchize […]' (Foucault, 1977:183) the student satisfaction of universities. This hierarchy *homogenises* universities in that they increasingly make student feedback one of their priorities (Brown and Carasso, 2013). Furthermore, national rankings *exclude* those universities which are situated towards the bottom of the rankings (for example, by students not selecting these universities to study at).

Similarly, (ii) the TEF awards universities with bronze, silver or gold ratings whilst only those universities with a favourable rating are allowed to raise their tuition fees in line with inflation. The OfS (2018: online; emphasis added) classifies TEF ratings as follows: Universities are awarded 'gold for delivering consistently outstanding *teaching, learning and outcomes for its students*' which is the 'highest quality found in the UK'. Silver is awarded to universities 'for delivering high quality *teaching, learning and outcomes*' which 'consistently exceeds [sic] rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education' (ibid.). Bronze ratings are awarded for 'delivering *teaching, learning and outcomes for its students* that meet rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education' (ibid.). Lastly, 'provisional awards are given to participating providers that meet national quality

requirements, but do not yet have sufficient data to be fully assessed' (ibid.). Again, the TEF, firstly, *compares* the "action" (i.e. the teaching) of individual universities

> 'to a whole [i.e. all universities] that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed.' (Foucault, 1977:182)

Secondly, the TEF *differentiates* individual universities 'from one another in terms of the overall rule' (p. 183) "to attain positive feedback" (Lisa). That is, this rule 'function[s] as a minimal threshold' (which is the case in the bronze rating) 'as an average to be respected' (in the case of the silver rating) 'or as an optimum towards which one must move' (i.e. the gold rating) (p. 183). Thirdly, the TEF *hierarchises* the 'level' of individual universities and, fourthly, 'introduces, through this 'value-giving' measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved' (e.g. universities must achieve the conformity of satisfied and employable students) (p. 183). Fifthly, it excludes those universities who only attained a Bronze rating (or, even worse, failed to attain any rating).

Returning to what had been mentioned as the 'shameful class' which only 'exists to disappear' (Foucault, 1977:182), the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016) for instance write that

> 'There is no compelling reason for incumbents to be protected from high quality competition. We want a globally competitive market that supports diversity, where anyone who demonstrates they have the potential to offer excellent teaching and clears our high quality bar can compete on a level playing field. If we place too much emphasis on whether a provider has a long established track record, this by definition will favour incumbents, and risks shutting out high quality and credible new institutions.' (p. 8)

That is, the constant threat of potentially becoming one of the lower ranking institutions could be understood to lie at the heart of the operation of the TEF.

Turning to Foucault's (1977) hierarchical observation and the panoptical gaze, the NSS shares similarities with Internal Surveys and SRMs. For instance, there is an increased temporal dimension of students' panoptical gazes since students observe their courses over the

duration of three years and then judge them in their final year. In addition, university rankings are panoptic because an anonymous mass of people, such as parents, prospective students and other stakeholders can consult these online. That is, even though universities do not know how many prospective students will eventually base their university choice on the NSS informed rankings (students' activities, like those of the prison guards in the Panopticon, are shielded from universities), there is the continuous possibility that students *might* consult these rankings. Hence, as with the prisoners never knowing whether they are being observed, universities never know whether students will "observe" the NSS results at a certain point in time. Both simply must assume that they are being constantly observed. As a result, university senior management become disciplined in that they put significant energy into attaining positive student feedback and become docile by acting in accordance with whatever they think might produce positive student satisfaction. A decrease in student satisfaction instantly puts additional scrutiny on departments, as captured in Lisa's journal entry:

> *Today the vice-chancellor sent an email to all staff about that the 2016 NSS results have decreased by a few percentage points from 2015. Whilst praising those courses which managed to increase their scores, he also said that the courses that attained negative student feedback must make it their absolute priority to scrutinise their courses in order to attain better student feedback in the future. (Excerpt 15. Lisa's research diary)*

The combined disciplinary force of the NSS, Internal Surveys and SRMs. When these separate student feedback mechanisms are viewed in combination, universities, courses and lecturers are exposed to a *continuous* panoptical gaze. That is, whilst SRMs predominantly observe *lectures* in a panoptical mode, Internal Surveys observe *modules* and *courses* and the NSS observes *courses* and *universities*. Moreover, whilst current students could be considered the main source of the panoptical gaze, additional stakeholders also pan-

optically observe student satisfaction, such as lecturers, fellow lecturers, module leaders, course leaders, senior management and prospective students. That is, surveillance functions not only 'top to bottom, but also to a certain extent from bottom to top and laterally' (Foucault, 1977:176).

Importantly, whilst panoptical gazes are exercised from a multitude of different origins, these gazes are, nevertheless, still channelled in a certain direction. Firstly, prospective students panoptically observe courses (for example, in rankings) whilst current students, in addition, "normalisingly judge" these courses. This pressures universities to improve their student satisfaction ratings. From here onwards disciplinary power predominantly functions in a pyramidal fashion which channels all the way from the top of the institutional hierarchical structure to the bottom. That is, by instrumentalising student feedback results, vice chancellors and senior leadership teams may use disciplinary power, by "*hierarchically observing"* and "*normalisingly judging"* course leaders. These, in return, do the same to module leaders who do the same to individual lecturers. In other words, if a university fails to attain a 'minimal threshold' (Foucault, 1977:183) - i.e. achieves a poor student feedback rating - vice chancellors examine the ranking of courses in the NSS and internal feedback systems. Such grading forces course leaders – particularly those who attained the worst feedback – to *examine* whether any modules can be identified to be made into 'a *case*' (p. 191; emphasis added) to be '*corrected'* using internal feedback systems. Consequently, module leaders are pressured into individualising those colleagues who attain student feedback below the norm, using a combination of Internal Survey data and Student Representative Meetings (SRMs). Hence, it could be argued that these combined ranking processes at various levels of scale in combination with hierarchical management structures facilitate the disciplining of module leaders, courses, departments and universities.

The effect of this continuous panoptical gaze is captured in my following research diary entry:

"I feel like I'm continuously thinking about student satisfaction. This really is at the heart of what I do. I'm worried that I might attain negative student feedback, downhearted when I receive negative feedback and thrilled when I receive positive feedback. Feedback has strong currency; it is an attractive social good and sought-after commodity. I shape my teaching on the basis of what I and my department think produces positive feedback and get rid of every aspect that the students might not like. I feel like I permanently dance to the hymn sheet of student voice." (Excerpt 16. My research diary)

Interestingly, the operation of disciplinary power cannot only be found in my data excerpts, but also in recommendations of some of the academic literature. For example, Horner (2010) suggests that the implementation of "spot checks" can improve tutor feedback to students. These spot checks, of course, operate panoptically in that lecturers never quite know whether their marking practices may be monitored. Therefore, lecturers must simply assume continuous surveillance and hence comply.

In summary, the NSS could be understood as a disciplinary "technology of government", or as what Foucault referred to as a "governmentality" (Foucault, 2009). The following section now seeks to show how the NSS could not only be understood as a "disciplinary", but also as a "neo-liberal" governmentality which governs by implementing economic "freedom" and "competition" as the predominant modes of interaction between stakeholders. This neo-liberal governmentality should be understood as an addition to the disciplinary character of the NSS (Foucault, 2009).

4.2   The NSS as Neo-liberal Governmentality

'Economics … are the method. The object is to change the heart and soul.' (Margaret Thatcher[9])

'Neoliberalism is most commonly understood as enacting an ensemble of economic policies in accord with its root principle of affirming free markets.' (Brown, 2015:28).

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[9] This quote is taken from Marquand (2009).

This section suggests why and how the NSS could be considered "neoliberal". It asserts that neoliberalism – as an ideology which seeks to implement *competitive markets in all realms of human life* (cf. Brown, 2015) – remains a useful term despite recent critiques which, for example, caricature the term neoliberalism as a 'conceptual Swiss-Army knife which can unpick and cut through almost any argument concerning the modern world' (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016:xiii). This section firstly introduces neoliberalism more generally whilst then moving on to Foucault's distinct take on the concept. It will then be shown how the NSS could be understood as a neo-liberal technology which governs the academic population. To differentiate between "neoliberalism", more generally, and Foucault's specific understanding of *"neo-liberalism",* I have added a hyphen whenever I intended to refer to Foucault's specific use of the term. This is also consistent with the spelling in Foucault's lecture series of 1978/79 (Foucault, 2008, 2009).

4.2.1   A General Introduction to Neoliberalism

At its root, this thesis utilises the following definition of neoliberalism: *"Neoliberalism is an ideology and policy package that seeks to foster competitive markets in all realms of social life".* This resonates with various definitions of neoliberalism, which conceptualise it as 'a programme of resolving problems of, and developing, human society by means of competitive markets' (Patomäki, 2009:432–433); as 'enacting an ensemble of economic policies in accord with its root principle of affirming free markets' (Brown, 2015) or as

> 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, *free markets*, and free trade.'
> (Harvey, 2005:2; emphasis added)

To gain a better understanding of neoliberalism, its predecessor - classical economic liberalism – is considered first. Whilst Adam Smith and David Ricardo are often considered to be the founding fathers of

economic liberalism (Brown, 2015), early conceptions of economic liberalism trace back to the French physiocrats and what was, at the time, understood as "political economy[10]" (Vardi, 2012). Crucial to political economy – and particularly to Adam Smith's account thereof - is the postulation of the self-interested individual who creates the best outcome for society by acting in his or her own interest (Smith, 1776). In other words, the "greater good" for society, counterintuitively, is not produced by the benevolence of people, but precisely by people following their own interests. Smith referred to this as the 'invisible hand' (p. 349). For the invisible hand to take effect, the state should not intervene in how people trade and conduct business but instead "step back" and restrain its efforts to protecting private property.

Importantly, however, this "invisible hand" can only operate if the drive for self-interest is combined with a crucial operating principle: that of *competition* (Smith, 1776). It is through this competition that the self-interest of one person is pitted against that of another. An effect of this competition is that prices for goods and services tend to return to what Smith calls the 'natural price' (p. 48), i.e. the price it costs the person to make the product and to continue his or her business. If there is competition between stakeholders, the natural price is determined by supply and demand. If competition fails to exist, monopolies arise where 'an individual or […] a trading company' are the sole suppliers of a product and can charge however much they want (p. 52).

Another seminal figure in the propagation of classical economic liberalism and associated markets was David Ricardo who 'preached the virtues of the 'free-market' and 'laissez-faire' economics' (Steger, 2010:loc 403). In Ricardo's account, markets should not be interfered with and open economic exchange between individuals and countries should be enabled (Ricardo, 1817). More specifically, Ricardo's 'comparative advantage' postulates that each country should exploit and

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[10] This is the reason why Karl Marx's (2014 [1867]) Kapital had the title, "*Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Okonomie*" ("*Capital: Critique of Political Economy*").

concentrate on their natural advantages (Steger, 2010:loc 410). Each country would then profit from trade because it can 'specialize in the production of those commodities for which it had a comparative advantage' (ibid.). For example, Italy has a comparative advantage to England because it can 'produce wine more cheaply than England' (ibid.).

These free market values persisted – and were further refined in the context the neoclassical economic movement (Harvey, 2005:20) - as mainstream policy until after the Great Depression when two economists began to gain influence: John Maynard Keynes and Karl Polanyi. These 'egalitarian liberals' challenged the idea of the government as 'night watchman' (p. 433) and its associated credos of minimal state intervention. Whilst strongly disagreeing with Marxist accounts of capitalism, which tended to frame the Great Depression as the end of capitalism, Keynes argued that capitalism 'had to be subjected to regulations and controls by a strong secular state' (ibid.). Governments should *increase* spending in times of economic crisis to create jobs (and therefore increase the spending habits of people) and *withdraw* spending in times of economic prosperity. Importantly, in this Keynesian doctrine, markets do not always self-regulate – as was argued by classical economic liberalism - but instead sometimes fail due to bad investments (ibid.).

This Keynesian philosophy was set in stone at the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference, which also saw the implementation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (which was later rebranded into the "World Bank") to give loans to Europe for its post-war reconstruction and to fund projects in other countries. Foremost, this new economic order sought to 'prevent a return to the catastrophic conditions that had so threatened the capitalist order in the great slump of the 1930s' as well as preventing 'the re-emergence of inter-state geopolitical rivalries that had led to the war' (Harvey, 2005:10).

This Keynesian 'golden age of controlled capitalism' (Steger, 2010:loc 453) lasted approximately from 1945 – 1975 and was highly

popular at the time and because it saw 'high wages, low inflation, and unprecedented levels of material wellbeing and social security'. This "golden age" – also known as 'embedded liberalism' (Harvey, 2005:11) – was termed 'welfarism' in the UK and the 'New Deal' in the United States. During this time, governments regulated the flow of money 'in and out of their territories' (Steger, 2010:loc 459) by, for example, implementing 'capital controls' (Harvey, 2005:11); rich individuals and corporations had to pay high taxes and a large proportion of the working class were enabled to ascend into the middle class (Steger, 2010). Even, 'working-class trade union power' was somewhat integrated into political processes and the state sometimes actively intervened in the economy (Harvey, 2005:11). Famously, due to the popularity of Keynesian politics even Republican president Nixon announced that 'we are all Keynesians now' (Steger, 2010:loc 471).

This "Golden Age" started to crumble with the oil crises in 1973: oil prices 'quadrupled … overnight', there was stagflation (i.e. high inflation combined with increasing unemployment), and decreasing profits of corporations (Steger, 2010:loc 484). According to Harvey (Harvey, 2005, 2010), there were two options to counter this economic stagflation: Western democracies had to either become more socialist or more neoliberal. In Harvey's (2005) take, the socialist option constituted a significant threat to the 'ruling classes' (ibid.) because, firstly, 'as asset values (stocks, property, savings) collapsed' (p. 15), their wealth also decreased. Secondly, another threat came from worker-owner programmes. For example, in Sweden, the 'Rehn-Meidner plan' sought to enable workers to *buy out* their companies to make these worker-owned (Harvey, 2005:15).

The second potential response to the crisis of Keynesianism was neoliberalism. In short, neoliberal ideology argued that it was precisely the Keynesian policies of tariffs in 'international trade' which led to 'high inflation and poor economic growth' (Steger, 2010:loc 491). Neoliberalism found its first consistent formulation in the Mont Pelerin Society founded by Friedrich August von Hayek in 1947 in Geneva (Harvey, 2005; Steger, 2010). The purpose of this conference was to revive

neoclassical theories[11] whilst being ardently opposed to Keynesian state intervention (Steger, 2010). One of the guests invited was Milton Friedman who rose to prominence in the 1970s when Friedman's followers (the "Chicago boys") found their first neoliberal test subject in fascist Chile under the rule of Pinochet in 1973 (ibid.). Neoliberals then succeeded in implementing their ideas in the shape of policies in the early 1980s under Margaret Thatcher (in the UK) and Ronald Reagan (in the US). In the 1990s, the "third way politics" of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton attempted to further implement marketisation whilst simultaneously establishing programmes to improve the conditions of those struggling with poverty under neoliberal economic policies (ibid.).

It is only very recently that the neoliberal doctrine of free markets has been subjected to widespread popular criticism in the wake of the global financial and economic crisis of 2008-9. Yet, neoliberal policies are kept afloat, perhaps combined with some neo-mercantilist undertones as embodied in the most recent state interventionist rhetoric of Donald Trump (Drezner, 2016)

Whilst neoliberalism's underlying ideology is characterised by its belief in free markets (Brown, 2015:28), it, importantly, can be delineated from classical economic liberalism in that

> 'Whereas classical liberalism represents a negative conception of state power in that the individual was taken as an object to be freed from the interventions of the state, neoliberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state's role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation.' (Olssen and Peters, 2005:315)

In short, under neoliberalism, the state is indispensable in ensuring the operation of competitive markets. In addition, neoliberalism goes alongside a range of characteristic policy and commercial developments. Firstly, neoliberalism includes the 'deregulation of industries

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[11] Towards the end of the 19th century neoclassical ideas increasingly replaced Adam Smith's, David Ricardo's and, of course, Karl Marx's theories (Harvey, 2005) and, contributed to the immense rise of capital and income inequality before the First World War (Piketty, 2015).

and capital flows' (Brown, 2015:28) including the deregulation of employee's rights regarding hiring and firing (Esping-Andersen and Regini, 2000) as well as a 'radical reduction in welfare state provisions and protections for the vulnerable' (Brown, 2015:28). Public goods, in the meantime, are increasingly privatised or outsourced, 'ranging from education, parks, postal services, roads, and social welfare to prisons and militaries' (ibid.). In addition, we find that progressive taxation is discarded in favour of regressive taxation (ibid.). This goes alongside 'an end of wealth redistributions' (ibid.). Moreover, we find that no human desire or need is safeguarded from being transformed into being used for profit, 'from college admissions preparation to human organ transplants, from baby adoptions to pollution rights, from avoiding lines to securing legroom on an airplane' (ibid.). Lastly, one of the most recent developments of neoliberalism includes the 'financialization of everything and the increasing dominance of finance capital in the dynamics of the economy and everyday life' (Brown, 2015:28).

Based on this outline of typical neoliberal policy effects, Brown (2015) argues that popular critiques have been directed at four broad themes: (i) rising inequality, (ii) 'unethical commercialization' (p. 29), (iii) 'intimacy of corporate and finance capital with the state' and (iv) the 'economic havoc' (p. 30) caused by financial crises. Firstly, critiques centring on *rising inequality* denounce that the richest stratum in society becomes wealthier whilst the middle classes work 'more hours for less pay, fewer benefits, less security, and less promise of retirement or upward mobility than at any time in the past half century' (p. 28). Simultaneously, the poorest become homeless or are deported 'into the growing urban and suburban slums of the world' (p. 29). This rising inequality, according to Piketty (2014), is promoted by the current system's failure to implement sufficient taxation to avoid a drifting apart of economic productivity and return on capital (e.g. through interest). Importantly, this increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny elite becomes 'socially destabilising' (p. 13).

Secondly, the theme of '*unethical commercialisation*' describes the fact that marketisation promotes 'human exploitation or degradation' (Brown, 2015:29), such as surrogate mothers from poorer countries catering for rich couples in richer countries. That is, neoliberalism limits what should be open to everyone (wilderness, education, infrastructure) or promotes horrific practices, such as 'organ trafficking, pollution rights, clear-cutting [or] fracking'. In other words, this line of critique laments that markets are not always inherently good because there are, for example, 'toxic waste' markets, weapon markets (Satz, 2010:91), 'human organ markets' (p. 197) and 'child labour' markets (p. 155).

According to Brown (2015) another set of critiques centres around the *'intimacy of corporation and finance capital with the state'* (p. 29; emphasis added) including the influence of private institutions on political decision making. For example, Wolin (2017) argues that political and economic elites are virtually indistinguishable in America and that the private sector increasingly fails to answer to democratically elected governments. In relation to the NSS, this intimacy can be delineated in that "Ipsos" is a global corporation with a total revenue of 1.73 billion Euros (Financial Times, 2018) and is remunerated by the state to assess a segment of the tertiary education sector.

Lastly, some critiques centre on the 'economic havoc' caused by financial crises, such as the crisis of 2008 (Brown, 2015). These critiques share a concern for the fact that the financial crisis was caused by Wall Street. Yet, financial capitalism very quickly returned to its pre-crisis exuberances whilst the rest of the world still suffers from the crisis's consequences (p. 29). For example, Duménil and Lévy (2011) posit that there is a remarkable similarity between the time leading up to the Great Depression and our current times and suggest that in order to avoid another Great Depression, a major change is needed in the way the economy is structured.

Whilst these critiques are valid and important for this thesis, there is one further pertinent analysis of neoliberalism which can be found in Foucault's (2008) concept of "neo-liberal governmentality". That is, in comparison to the above critiques of neoliberalism 'as a set of state policies, a phase of capitalism, or an ideology that set loose the market to restore profitability for a capitalist class' (Brown, 2015:30), "neo-liberal governmentality" is a useful notion because it describes what happens to subjects when a certain neoliberal rationality is instilled in their minds. Neo-liberal governmentality, as this thesis argues, is also important as a concept because it explains how neo-liberalism can be used to govern a population, thereby preventing this population from rebelling against the ruling elite. Brown (2015:30) writes that neo-liberal governmentality frames neoliberalism

> 'as an order of normative reason, that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life.'

The following section provides an in-depth discussion of Foucault's take on liberalism and neo-liberalism.

4.2.2 Foucault's Conception of Neo-Liberalism

Foucault first mentions 'liberal governmentality' in his lecture series "Security, Territory, Population" (Foucault, 2009:370) and neo-liberal governmentality in the second half of "The Birth of Biopolitics" (Foucault, 2008). Liberal governmentality, as a concept, is first implied when Foucault elaborates on "apparatuses of security" (Foucault, 2009) (or "dispositifs de sécurité" in the original French text (Foucault, 2004)). Liberal governmentality denotes

> 'the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power *that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument.*' (Foucault, 2009:108; emphasis added)

Importantly, *"apparatuses of security"*- and their connected notions of "political economy" and "population" - must be delineated from "sovereign power" (in which an autocratic ruler seeks to rule over a certain territory) or "disciplinary power" as expounded in section 4.1. That is, in comparison to disciplinary power - and its large-scale equivalent of mercantilist grain price regulation - apparatuses of security enter a certain amount of freedom (cf. "political economy") into the art of governing by letting 'things happen' (p. 45).

More specifically, mercantilist policies of the 17th and 18th century enforced a policing of the price of grain to its lowest possible price, so that farmers produced cheap grain which could then be sold on the international market to, in return, attract gold into the country. To achieve this "lowest price", regulation was necessary, embodied in price controls through 'disciplinary mechanisms' (p. 62). Foucault argues this was why the 'police' state (p. 318) enjoyed popularity at the time. Whilst the primary objective of the police state was to make the population of the country into a productive force so that the state could protect its own interest (cf. *raison d'état*) in its competitive relationship with its European rivals, a side-product of these mercantilist practices of policing grain prices was frequent famines. These famines, in return, posed significant risks to the ruling elites both externally (through decreasing economic productivity and military power) and internally (due to the dangers of civil unrest). This civil unrest from famines– which Foucault describes as a 'scarcity scourge' - can be described as follows: 'people suffered hunger, so entire populations and the nation suffered hunger' (p. 41). Foucault argues that 'it was precisely this kind of immediate *solidarity*, the massiveness of the event [of large-scale civil unrests]' which the elites were eager to prevent (p. 41; emphasis added).

Thus, after various failed mercantilist policies, the "physiocrats" (as mentioned in section 4.2.1) introduced a new economic model which sought both to prevent famines and to govern the population more effectively. This was to be achieved by introducing 'laissez-faire' into the art of governing (p. 41). This model suggested that instead of

regulating grain prices to the lowest possible price, they should be allowed to rise and then settle at the 'just level' (p. 343) based on supply and demand. Moreover, (ii) 'free trade between countries' was to be encouraged (p. 345). Consequently, in periods of grain shortages, France would, for example, be able to import grain and in times of abundance, people would be able to export (ibid.). *Crucially, the aim of trade liberalisation was <u>not</u> to prevent people from dying of hunger in toto.* Rather, a statistical assessment of the danger of a large-scale famine and ensuing political instability was to be applied. Whilst famines were to be avoided, the fact that certain individuals would starve was to be understood as an *indispensable element* of "apparatuses of security" (i.e. "liberal governmentality"):

> 'the scarcity-scourge disappears … [the] scarcity that causes the death of individuals not only does not disappear, *it must not disappear.'* (p. 42; emphasis added)

Turning now to Foucault's explication of *neo-liberal governmentality,* this notion constitutes a partial continuation of, but also a partial deviation from liberal governmentality (Brown, 2015). In this sense, it significantly strays from Marxist accounts where neoliberalism is framed as the result of 'crises of capitalist accumulation' (cf. Brown, 2015:59). More specifically, Foucault's understanding of his (liberal) "apparatuses of security" (Foucault's, 2009:388) resonates with that of "neo-liberal governmentality" in that both try to safeguard the 'security of the natural phenomena of economic processes…' (p. 353). In other words, under liberalism, the state's responsibility had shifted towards making 'natural regulations' (that is, the regulations of the market) to 'work' instead of the former micro-managerial regulations of mercantilism (p. 353). However, whilst under liberalism this was mainly confined to the state protecting private property, under neo-liberalism the role of the state is much more *active* in that markets are no longer natural and it

is the state's responsibility to *perpetually create conditions for the operation of competitive markets* (cf. Harvey, 2005; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Brown, 2015).

Foucault's understanding of neo-liberalism (in delineation from liberalism) operates under the following tenets: First, *competition* becomes 'non-natural' (whilst under liberalism it was conceived as "natural") and must therefore continuously be *produced* by the state (Brown, 2015:62). Second, *economic growth* becomes the state's only reason for existence and its sole 'social policy' (p. 63). Third, 'competition replaces exchange' in that humans are no longer primarily viewed as bartering goods and service but are, instead, in perpetual *competition* with one another (p. 64). This goes alongside the effect that 'inequality replaces equality' (p. 64): goods are not exchanged for an *equal* value of money (i.e. equality); rather, competition rests on *inequality* by necessarily producing winners and losers. Fourth, 'human capital replaces labor' (p. 65) in that all people (even the most impoverished factory workers) are framed as "human capital" that offers its services, instead of "wage labourers" who sell their labour power. This reframing is also more effective than liberalism in obscuring "class" because everyone, and not only the working class, becomes framed as "human capital". Fifth, following on from the idea of human capital, 'entrepreneurship replaces production' (p. 65). Sixth, law becomes a support for competition instead of a limiting force for the operation of capital. In other words, law becomes the juridical framework which produces competition. Seventh, the market is constructed as the 'truth' so that anyone who adheres by its principles is considered realistic and anyone who refuses to as naïve (p. 67).

The central notions of *competition, homo œconomicus* and *human capital* shall now be explored more deeply. In the 1979 lecture series, "The Birth of Biopolitics", Foucault (2008) begins by exploring German Ordo-liberalism, which he considers as the origins of neo-liberalism. Importantly, ordo-liberals, breaking with classical economic theory, had a 'radical anti-naturalistic conception of the market and of the prin-

ciple of competition' (Lemke, 2001:193). That is, ordo-liberals suggested that markets must continuously be maintained by the state and, thus, rejected laissez-faire (Foucault, 2008). Whilst laissez-faire produced monopolisation,

> 'pure competition, which is the essence of the market, can only appear if it is produced, and if it is produced by an active governmentality.' (Foucault, 2008:121)

This means that the economy is no longer natural (liberalism), but institutional (neo-liberalism) (Lemke, 2001:195). Similarly, an "entrepreneurial self" is not the primordial state of human identity, but rather needs to be actively constructed by refiguring all social relations as economic relations of 'competition' (p. 195). This rejection of the naturalness of competition in human relations was also captured in the ordo-liberal concept of "Vitalpolitik" which sought to oppose any moral rejection of entrepreneurialism (p. 195). In short, under the technology of neo-liberal governmentality, there is no 'diminishment or reduction of state sovereignty and planning capacities but a displacement from formal to informal techniques of government' (Lemke, 2002:58), i.e. those of *competition*.

As in Ordo-liberalism, the Chicago school under Milton Friedman (see section 4.2.1) rejected any type of socialist politics and supported 'economic liberty'. However, in addition, the Chicago school aimed at restructuring hitherto non-economic spheres along economic principles (Foucault, 2008). Moreover, in contrast to Ordo-liberalism, the Chicago school rejected social policy intervention, such as 'assistance to the unemployed, health care cover, [and] housing policy' (p. 323). Thus, government was refigured as an enterprise in itself and was given the task to (i) 'universalize competition' into all human relations and (ii) 'invent market-shaped systems of action for individuals, groups and institutions' (Lemke, 2001:197). In comparison to classical economic liberalism, the economy was now supposed to embrace 'the entirety of human action' to be guided by *competition* (p. 197):

'The society regulated by reference to the market that the neo-liberals are thinking about is a society in which the regulatory principle should not be so much the exchange of commodities as the mechanisms of *competition*. It is these mechanisms that should have the greatest possible surface and depth and should also occupy the greatest possible volume in society. This means that what is sought is not a society subject to the commodity-effect, but a society subject to the dynamic of *competition*. Not a super- market society, but an enterprise society. The homo œconomicus sought after is not the man of exchange or man the consumer; he is the man of enterprise and production.'
(Foucault, 2008:147;emphasis added)

This homo œconomicus - a notion which, according to Foucault (2008), is interestingly almost entirely absent in classical liberalism in its verbatim form - *is the* self-interested, rational, autonomous, entrepreneurial self who is in constant pursuit of her best interest (Foucault, 2008; Brown, 2015; Lemke, 2016). In other words, *homo œconomicus* is eager to enhance her or his human capital (Brown, 2015). As suggested by ordo-liberals, human capital is a mixture of 'inborn physical genetic predisposition[s]' on the one hand and skills deriving from '"investments" … in nutrition, education, training and also love [and] affection' (Lemke, 2001:199). (It could be suggested that this idea of enhancing one's human capital is ubiquitous in contemporary Western societies. This is, for example, particularly visible in CVs and the documentation of training courses.) Crucial to the operation of *homo œconomicus* is its supposed 'capacity for self-control' which Foucault theorises within his concept of 'techniques of the self' or 'technologies of the self' (Lemke, 2002:52). It is here, where (neo-liberal) governmentality connects the state with the subjectivation of the individual (Lemke, 2016). More specifically, a neoliberal "technology of the self" refigures individual subjects, 'families and associations' as responsible – i.e. as being able to control their own "selves" - which also goes alongside the shifting of 'responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, and so forth' into issues of 'self-care' (p. 59).

In short, whilst the rise of liberal governmentality enabled the governing of the population by avoiding large-scale discontent through the introduction of laissez-faire, the rise of neo-liberalism allowed for the governing of the population through the active creation of *competitive*

markets. That is, whilst some more Marxist orientated scholars may frame neoliberalism predominantly as a project of maintaining and concentrating financial capital in the hands of an elite (e.g. Harvey, 2005), Foucault understands neo-liberalism as a governmental technology which makes it possible to govern the population through the market and competition.

4.2.3 The NSS as Neo-Liberal Governmentality

Turning now to student feedback systems, it is suggested that the NSS and its resultant SETs do not only function as disciplinary technologies (as was argued in section 4.1), but also as "apparatuses of security" as part of a wider *liberal governmentality* as well as practices of "competition" as part of a *neo-liberal governmentality*. Starting with "liberal governmentality", it could be suggested that in analogy to the physiocrats' introduction of economic "freedom" into the governing of the population, a similar amount of freedom can also be found in the practices of university staff. For example, Emily remarks:

> *"This job [as a lecturer] is really hard, but what struck me is the incredible amount of freedom we have here in comparison to when I worked at schools. It was almost a little bit hard to get used to this. When I first arrived on my first day, I asked whether I could …[do certain activities] and … [my senior colleague] just said, "You don't need to ask me for permission, but this sounds wonderful." (Excerpt 17. Interview with Emily)*

However, just as the "freedom" discussed by the physiocrats and later 'Adam Smith' (cf. Foucault, 2008:38) was about the economic "freedom to engage in commerce" (to exchange goods, to make money etc.), lecturers are "free" to engage in any activity; but only *as long as* the teaching yields *good student feedback.* In other words, freedom becomes redefined as the freedom to achieve certain narrow quantitative outcomes, such as ranking positions on league tables. Interestingly, this, in return, may lead to practices in which the anticipation of positive feedback is the guiding principle of pedagogical practice:

> *"When I'm planning for a session, I often think to myself, "Oh this is great. The students will really like this and then hopefully will give me good feedback." (Excerpt 18. Interview with Karl)*

Second, this introduction of "freedom" produces important *collateral damage*, as discussed above. That is, just as the physiocrats accepted the deaths of a few members of society within their liberalised trading practices, a few individual lecturers, who fail to produce acceptable student feedback, may face redundancy:

> *"My colleague got some negative feedback. It's crazy that her boss told her that if this negative student feedback keeps on happening that her boss is under pressure from above to "keep all options open". So she told me that she's working "insane hours" to make the students happy. She said that it feels a bit like a witch-hunt and she thinks that the students pick up on this. She perceives them as especially needy and actually quite rude sometimes. For example, apparently one of her students interrupted her in the middle of a session, just shouting, "Stop. I don't get it. Explain it again." (Excerpt 19. Lisa's research diary)*

As captured in the experience of Lisa's colleague, this "threat of redundancy" is, however, not to be avoided, but rather necessary. That is, as long as the "rest" of the population (Foucault, 2009) (i.e. the rest of the collegiate) do not starve (are made redundant), the deaths of a few individuals (the redundancy of a few lecturers) are not only accepted but also *necessary*. In Foucault's (amended) words, 'the [mass redundancy] disappears … [the redundancy] that causes the [precarity] of individuals not only does not disappear, it must not disappear' (p. 42; original changed to suit analysis). Rather, redundancies may function as a "warning" along the lines of "look what happens when you fail to produce results"[12]. Consequentially, the possibility of an 'immediate solidarity' is not only minimised (i.e. colleagues are less likely to step out of line), many lecturers may, indeed, work even harder to attain positive ratings, as in Lisa's colleague who was working "insane hours".

This importance of apparatuses of security – and their associated elements of 'statistics' (Foucault, 2009:62) and "collateral damage" -

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[12] This also resonates with Marx's notion of the "industrial reserve army" as discussed by Srnicek and Williams (2016).

are also important for intra-institutional and inter-institutional practices. For example, it could be hypothesised that university senior leadership may force a *department,* which fails to achieve acceptable positive ratings, to close; however, as long as the whole university remains operational, staff of other departments are less likely to mobilise. The closed department simultaneously functions as a warning against solidary action and produces an urgency for other departments to work harder. Similarly, I suggest that widespread discontent in the UK university sector can be prevented by introducing university rankings: akin to football league tables in which there always *must* be a bottom team, in university league tables, some universities *must fail* whilst others *must succeed*. This means that some failing universities are a necessary and productive feature: the fear of becoming one of these bottom universities forces university senior leaders into (performative) action, oriented towards narrowly defined quantifiable outcomes, such as student satisfaction (Ball, 2003).

Turning the attention away from liberalism and towards neo-liberalism, the NSS can be understood as a neo-liberal governmental technology. Firstly, the NSS operates by establishing *competition* at various levels of scale by inventing 'market-shaped systems of action for individuals, groups and institutions' (Lemke, 2001:197). That is, individuals are pitched against one another in competitive struggles. This also goes alongside the desire to be "*better than others*", as captured in Lisa's research diary:

> *"I really don't know but I can't help to feel smug when I get really good feedback and others don't. I don't think I'm usually very competitive, but when it comes to student feedback I can't help but feel like I'm winning when students rate me as excellent and other lecturers worse."*
> *(Excerpt 20. Lisa – diary excerpt)*

Secondly, departments are pitched against one another in that those departments with the worst student feedback are put under increasing pressure to improve their feedback or otherwise face closure. Returning to "Excerpt 4" above, Lisa remarks:

"Recently in one of my staff meetings, the course leader suggested that if the course was unable to gain better feedback in internal surveys that the course might be shut down." (Lisa's research diary)

Lastly, universities are pitched against one another in their pursuit over "customers" (i.e. students). This purposeful *creation of competition*, as delineated by Foucault (2008), is reflected in the recent UK white paper "Success as a Knowledge Economy" which had already been discussed in section 4.1.2. This white paper praises the virtues of competitive markets (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, DfB, 2016:8) and needs to be understood in the context of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (see section 2.5). The DfB argues that 'a competitive market' (p. 8) should be created because

> 'competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception'. (p. 8)

Revisiting the quote which was already presented in section 4.1, it can be seen that the neo-liberal the signifier "competition" is reiterated throughout:

> 'There is no compelling reason for incumbents to be protected from high quality *competition*. We want a globally *competitive* market that supports diversity, where anyone who demonstrates they have the potential to offer excellent teaching and clears our high quality bar can *compete* on a level playing field. If we place too much emphasis on whether a provider has a long established track record, this by definition will favour incumbents, and risks shutting out high quality and credible new institutions.' (p. 8; emphasis added)

In addition to this (unashamed) avowal of competition, it is interesting to note the seemingly emancipatory language used in this policy document. That is, whilst the meaning of diversity is not specified (e.g. does it refer to "courses on offer", "student characteristics", or "lecturer characteristics"?), the signifier "diversity" evokes a feeling of progressiveness and openness. This notion of "diversity" is then 'connected' (Gee, 2005:13) to the concept of a 'globally competitive market' (DfB,

2016:8) despite the fact that "diversity" and "globally competitive markets" do not necessarily resonate well with one another. (Put bluntly, when I think of "diversity", I do not think of "global competition".)

In addition, this policy section introduces the notion of a 'level playing field', something which is characteristic of the neo-liberal - and more specifically the ordo-liberal conviction - that it is necessary to avoid monopolisation[13]. It also adds a discourse of 'fairness' - reminiscent of "wiping the slate clean". Importantly, this fairness is framed as fairness in a "competition" (in comparison to fairness of exchanges; of income, etc.). Furthermore, the phrase 'track record' has an association with "business language". In other words, as Foucault implies, under neo-liberalism, competition is universalised into all human relations by inventing 'market-shaped systems of action for individuals, groups and institutions' (Lemke, 2001:197).

Moreover, the DfB argues that higher education quality is equated to prosperity and the notion of a 'knowledge economy' (DfB, 2016:8-9), suggesting 'strong arguments to encourage greater competition between high quality new and existing providers in the HE sector'. Furthermore, in analogy to Foucault's notion of the introduction of statistics into the liberal art of governing in the middle of the 18th century, economic statistics are used to justify political decision-making:

> 'Graduates are central to our prosperity and success as a knowledge economy, and higher education is a key export sector. […] Recent research at the London School of Economics demonstrates the strong correlation between opening universities and significantly increased economic growth. Doubling the number of universities per capita is associated with over 4% higher future GDP per capita.' (p .9)

Importantly, whilst in all competitions there must be losers and winners, a small amount of collateral damage is to be expected (i.e. some universities will fail in this game); however, as long as there is a '4% higher future GDP per capita', this collateral damage is necessary and desirable as it encourages universities 'to raise their game' (DfB,

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[13] It goes without saying that neoliberalism frequently fails to avoid monopolisation which can be observed in the case of Cartels (cf. Harvey, 2005).

2016:9). Moreover, the above excerpt implies that Higher Education only exists for an instrumental purpose: the reason to open higher education is to increase economic performance instead of a myriad of other possible reasons, such as personal fulfilment or a desire to learn. We see in action what Brown (2015) describes as the refiguring of all spheres of life in economic terms (i.e. in this case GDP growth).

In what follows, the DfB (2016:9) cautions people that 'we have not yet made a decisive enough move to open the higher education market. More specifically,

> 'the UK Competition and Markets Authority[14] (CMA)'s report on competition in the HE sector concluded that aspects of the current HE system could be holding back greater competition and needed to be addressed' (p. 9).

Utilising Gee's (2005:12) discourse analysis as presented in section 3.1, '*connections*' are made between "restriction" (i.e. a 'holding back') and "competition". In addition, "competition" is given a higher status as a "social good" whilst the lack thereof is framed as an undesirable quantity. Competition is then connected to the 'Conversations' (p. 51) around fairness:

> 'new and innovative providers offering high quality higher education continue to face significant and disproportionate challenges to establishing themselves in the sector.' (DfB, 2016:9)

There are also intertextual connections to business language, such as refiguring universities as 'providers' and the higher education landscape as a 'sector' (p. 9). This creates 'significance' (Gee, 2005: 11) by appealing to people's emotional sense of feeling sorry for the underdog. In addition, the text enacts the 'identity' (p. 11) of a 'new and innovative provider' (DfB, 2016:9) which, in its "under-dog position", has hitherto found it impossible to compete with other established institutions.

Interestingly, the fact that new institutions are unsuccessful is not blamed on the actual model of competition itself. (For example, it could

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[14] Which was established in 2013

be proposed that, if more collaboration (instead of competition) was encouraged, older universities, such as Oxford, could significantly assist newer universities in developing their research profile.) Instead, competition is not only advocated as the cure against unfair treatment, but forced upon universities through technologies, such as the TEF and the NSS. This resonates with Brown's (2015) assertion that under neo-liberalism, competition needs to be secured by a strong state. Therefore,

> 'making it easier for these providers to enter and expand will help drive up teaching standards overall; enhance the life chances of students; drive economic growth; and be a catalyst for social mobility. … High quality new providers will also serve the national economy by enabling us to continue to meet the needs of international students who increasingly demand access to top quality higher education, and help contribute towards boosting education exports.' (DfB, 2016:9)

Not only does the DfB suggest that teaching standards will be raised, but competition (in an increasingly unequal world) will 'enhance the life chances of students' (p. 9). What is not mentioned here is that only those students' life chances will be enhanced who eventually manage to secure a job (i.e. those who manage to "win" and not "lose" (Brown, 2015)) within a hyper-competitive job market.

Moreover, in analogy to the physiocrats' dissolution of grain-price regulations in 18th century France, the DfB suggests that 'in order to enable greater competition, we will simplify the regulatory landscape' by reducing 'unnecessary barriers to entry'. It could be suggested that this aim of "deregulating" higher education is not because of benevolent reasons (e.g. that regulation is experienced somewhat negatively by university actors which may prompt a "caring" DfB to discontinue regulation) but because it simply turns out to be *ineffective in governing* the university population. Just as 'raison d'État' ("state reason") (Foucault, 2009:237) found that mercantilism was ineffective in producing sufficient economic growth because of its 'barriers to the entry of grain' (which is why political economy was introduced), this policy text seeks to introduce political economy to replace 'barriers to entry' of prospective students. Yet, the DfB (2016:9) acknowledges that

there still is the necessity to 'ensure quality is built into our reforms at every stage, from the way we regulate new entrants to the incentives on incumbents'.

Moving away from this macro-level policy analysis and returning to the NSS, I suggest that the NSS also fosters "*homo œconomicus",* i.e. the entrepreneurial self who is in constant pursuit to enhance her or his human capital. Human capital operates 'upon the following maxim: do what you want but take care that your human capital is adapted' (Simons and Masschelein, 2008a). For example, Lisa quotes a colleague who remarked that

> *"As long as the students are happy, you can do whatever you want."*
> *(Excerpt 21. Lisa's research diary"*

However, upon closer inspection, lecturers are not free to do *whatever* they want (i.e. a genuine freedom), but they are "free" to devise innovative strategies to raise student satisfaction ("as long as students are happy"). Moreover, it could be suggested that the NSS promotes neoliberal "technologies of the self". That is, lecturers, departments, and universities become successful within the game of competition if they enhance their 'capacity for self-control' (Lemke, 2002:52) and become 'responsibilized' (Brown, 2015:134). For example, student satisfaction is no longer seen as the result of a complex interplay of various (often idiosyncratic) factors (such as a "student effort", "increasing class sizes", "increasing pressure to optimise income streams through tuition fees"; and, most importantly, larger societal factors, such as "increasing precarity" and "raising living expenses"), but becomes the sole *responsibility* of lecturers, departments and universities (just as "progress" becomes the sole responsibility of teachers in schools):

> *"I was speaking to one of my colleagues today. She said that she thinks that often students don't understand that learning is hard and is supposed to be hard, like "a hard and often painful process". Instead, students see it as the responsibility of their lecturers that they should make learning easy." (Excerpt 22. Lisa's research diary)*

In short, the responsibility of enhancing the "student experience" is shifted towards lecturers whose primary objective now is to make learning "easy" and "fun" instead of "challenging", perhaps sometimes "painful", but ultimately "rewarding". When student feedback remains poor, lecturers may largely internalise this feedback by "taking responsibility":

> *"I am not teaching this one class any longer as the decision has been made to take this class off me due to negative student feedback from that class. I feel like I really failed on this instance even though I tried really hard to make things accessible and clear. But it is also my students' fault in that they simply don't understand things. But this won't help me much. If this happens in future seminars, I know that I will get into trouble with my line managers." (Excerpt 23. Lisa's research diary)*

In other words, Lisa oscillates between attributing the negative feedback to her own lecturer identity ("I really failed on this instance") and simultaneously attempts to shift the responsibility onto the students, knowing that she, however, will ultimately be held accountable and responsible. Interestingly, it could be suggested that this "responsibilisation" has created a contradiction. That is, counter to the neo-liberal avowal of the entrepreneurial self, the opposite starts to emerge - a rather *risk-averse self* as captured in excerpt 2 (see page 59):

> *"After one of my taught English sessions, [a colleague] informed me that he had just had a meeting with student representatives and that they were 'really happy' with my teaching…[As a result of this feedback,] I…asked myself the question, 'What can I do in the future to attain the same good student feedback?'. I believe this was the moment when I also started feeling a little trapped in my practice. That is, I wanted to continue teaching in a similar fashion so that my students would continue to give me positive student feedback…." (My Research Diary)*

That is, when lecturers are fully construed as *homo œconomicus* – the self-interested entrepreneur – they may reason that in order to succeed (i.e. to maintain good student feedback) one must recreate precisely those instances where good feedback was obtained. This desire for good feedback (and the fear of attaining less favourable feedback) may instead produce subjects who become risk-averse rather than risk-taking. Yet, regardless of how responsible lecturers become, good student feedback is not guaranteed as

'a subject construed and constructed as human capital both for itself and for a firm or state is at persistent risk of failure, redundancy and abandonment through no doing of its own, regardless of how savvy and responsible it is.' (Brown, 2015:37)

This resonates with Lisa's research diary:

"One of the other campuses is now definitely going to close. I feel really sorry for my colleagues because they haven't really done anything wrong. Rather they were just at the wrong place at the wrong time and may now be made redundant." (Excerpt 24. Lisa's research diary)

That is, lecturers become 'human capital' (Foucault, 2008:219) in that they attempt to self-invest in their own futures. However, as in any genuine market, they are exposed to all associated risks (Brown, 2015). Importantly, these risks are sometimes entirely beyond the control of individual people (and institutions for that matter). For instance, larger scale market forces may make impossible any local resistance to this competitive HEI landscape. This is captured in Lisa's following diary entry:

"Today, I went on strike and tried to picket outside the university. It was surprising how many of my colleagues, however, decided to come into work, presumably because of the university open day. I remember just standing in front of the entrance to our university building and realised that one of my colleagues entered the building. I remember approaching him in a fashion akin to sellers of charity products on the high street and handed him one of the leaflets. He then responded, in what I perceived to be a slightly agitated fashion that he was thinking about going on strike but then decided to go into work because if the university does not recruit enough students we will not have [a] job to strike within any more." (Excerpt 25. Lisa's research diary)

Before moving on, I would like to situate Foucault's notion of governmentality within his larger conception of power. Power, according to Foucault, is about the conduct of conduct (Lemke, 2001, 2002), i.e. 'the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed' (Foucault, 1982:790). 'Power only exists when it is put into action' (Foucault, 1982:788) and describes all processes in which the behaviour of people can be changed. To arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of power, Lemke (2002) suggests that Foucault differentiates between (i) power as '*strategic games*' (p. 53; emphasis in original); (ii) power as '*government*' (p. 53; emphasis in original); and

(iii) power as '*domination*' (p. 53; emphasis in original). First, 'power as *strategic games*' (ibid.) denotes those everyday relationships where one person tries to influence the actions of another person. This type of power can express itself in various ways, such as 'ideological manipulations or rational argumentation, moral advice or economic exploitation' (Lemke, 2002:53) and is not necessarily deplorable, but could be empowering. Secondly, government describes the type of power discussed at length above, i.e. governmentality as a 'systemised' technology of government which 'goes beyond the spontaneous exercise of power over others' and follows 'a specific form of reasoning (a "rationality")' (p. 53). Lastly, '*domination* is a particular type of power relationship that is both stable and hierarchical, fixed and difficult to reverse' (p. 53; emphasis in original). This, for example, includes extreme forms of subjugation, such as killing someone or strapping someone to a hospital bed. That is, "domination" - or "states of domination" (Foucault et al., 1987; Lemke, 2002) or "violence" (Foucault, 1982) - describe the following:

> 'States of domination, [are when] the relations of power … find themselves firmly set and congealed. When an individual or a social group manages to block a field of relations of power, to render them impassive and invariable and to prevent all reversibility of movement – by means of instruments which can be economic as well as political or military – we are facing what can be called a state of domination.'
> (Foucault et al., 1987:114)

In a state of domination, 'the practice of liberty' either 'does not exist or exists only unilaterally or is extremely confined and limited' (p. 114).

Another way to conceptualise Foucault's understanding of power is to suggest that power ranges from "technologies of the self", on the one hand, to "technologies of domination", on the other. Returning to the notion of governmentality discussed above, Lemke (2002) argues that the meeting point between these technologies of self and domination is what Foucault calls "government". That is, 'government refers to a continuum, which extends from political government right through to forms of self-regulation – namely, "technologies of the self"' (p. 59).

Interestingly, this is also visible in how students are asked questions in the latest instantiation of the NSS. That is, power conceived as the "conduct of conduct" – i.e. as the working on the actions of others - is clearly visible in that students no longer answer whether their courses have taught them something. Instead, NSS questions comprise 'my course has challenged me to achieve my best work' or 'my course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth' (Ipsos Mori, 2017:online). In other words, the NSS seeks to assess how well courses have enabled students to conduct their self-conduct.

Moreover, it could be suggested that government may sometimes mean the application of domination (for example, when people are strapped to a bed in a psychiatric ward or when people are kettled on a demonstration). However, a government of the whole population is most effectively achieved through 'technologies of the self' which help people conduct their own conduct (i.e. they determine their own actions). Yet, these actions must fall within a certain 'field of possible action' (p. 52). The latter point is crucial: lecturers may choose from a range of possible tactics (a 'field of possible action') to raise student feedback. However, "not to raise student feedback" is not an option (it is not within this 'field of possible action').

4.2.4 Intermediate Conclusion: Competition Everywhere!

In summary, what according to Foucault defines neo-liberalism and delineates it from classical economic liberalism is that neo-liberal ideology does not believe in governments simply playing the "night watchman". Rather, under neo-liberalism, it becomes the government's duty to ensure that competitive markets develop and operate "effectively". In other words, neo-liberalism holds on to the idea of the 'invisible hand' (i.e. that the people's self-interest creates the optimal progress of humanity), but this self-interest is neither natural nor does it always emerge automatically. Instead, it is the government's *responsibility to*

create the conditions for the emergence of competitive markets. Importantly, this means that instead of denoting a natural phenomenon, markets become a desirable phenomenon:

> 'if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary.' (Harvey, 2005:2)

Crucially, this logic of the desirability of markets makes it possible that markets are not any longer requested simply in the sphere of the *economic*. Rather, since competitive markets are *always* desirable, they become extended to *all realms* of social life (Brown, 2015). What has come to be known under the terminology of New Public Management (Steger, 2010) – i.e. the public (sector) is remade in the image of the private sector with the (purported) intention of making the public sector more efficient (Steger, 2010) - is just one example of this remaking of the social in the image of the economic (Brown, 2015). The following section now returns to Brown's (2015) assertion that competition becomes the new overriding principle how human and institutional interactions are structured by exploring what happens in "hypercompetitive" situations.

I would like to begin by examining one contemporary television programme, entitled "Love Island" (ITV, 2018). "Love Island" in many ways could be considered to embody neo-liberalism in its quintessential form because it incorporates two of its indispensable elements: (i) desire (for other people) and (ii) competition (both of which are artificially created). For instance, in one stretch of episodes, four women were partnered up with four men. Suddenly, one additional man was introduced whose task it was to "choose" one of the women and thereby break up the partnerships only just formed. This "chosen" woman then had to leave her old partner to be with the new contestant.

After this contestant made his "choice" [15], the latest task was announced: shortly, all partners would have to reshuffle and the man who ended up "partner-less" would be cast out of the competition.

I suggest that this purposeful creation of a scenario in which the production and depiction of competitive desperation is celebrated is characteristic of contemporary neo-liberalism in which all social interactions increasingly become framed as competitive interactions with necessary losers and winners (Brown, 2015). I furthermore suggest that competition – in all of its forms and not necessarily restricted to competition in a strictly economic sense (cf. Brown, 2015) - is contingent on *desire*. If there was no desire for something (to earn more money, to get out of a desperate situation, to win against someone in a sports competition), there would be no competition. For example, it would drastically reduce the extent of economic competition, if people were simply not interested in money. If everyone lived in decent housing, there would be no need to desire better housing. This take on desire is also implied in Foucault's assertion in the context of the emergence of liberalism in which desire becomes naturalised:

> '…[Amongst idiosyncratic actions in the population] there is at least one invariant that means that the population taken as a whole has one and only one mainspring of action. This is desire. Desire is an old notion that first appeared and was employed in spiritual direction (to which, possibly, we may be able to return),* and it makes its second appearance within techniques of power and government. Every individual acts out of desire. One can do nothing against desire.' (Foucault, 2009:72)

The liberal art of governing, hence, is about how to govern by allowing desire to flourish. In addition, I propose that competition usually involves the desire for something *finite*. This is precisely what happens in Love Island where a desire for the *finite* love and affection of another person (often an exclusive trait) means that competition *must* arise.

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[15] Other interesting lines of enquiry could revolve around the question of why all contestants were heterosexual and why a man should be entitled or forced to "steal" a woman of another man.

There are a myriad other reality TV programmes which artificially create competition through creating desire over something finite (i.e. there can only be one winner), such "The Apprentice", "X-Factor" and "The Great British Bake Off", though these may somewhat pale in comparison to Love Island's instrumentalisation of one of the strongest of desires (i.e. the physical desire for another human being) .

These "hyper-competitions", including their construction of artificially created situations of strong desire over something finite, are also embodied in dramatised television series. For example, in the 2005 final episode of Doctor Who, the Doctor – a benevolent alien who frequently saves the universe from destruction - is caught on a space station which continuously broadcasts a plethora of game shows. For example, in "The Weakest Link", a robot ("Anne-Droid") punishes contestants who "are the weakest link" by (apparent) death through a laser-beam. Similarly, the person who is discarded from the Big Brother House after each round is "evicted from life". Importantly, in these games, contestants do not have a choice but *must* participate unless they wish to die. Under neo-liberalism, we similarly *must* participate or otherwise are discarded onto the streets (Brown, 2015).

Competition in its crassest form is, however, famously displayed in the film *Battle Royale* (*Battle Royale*, 2000). Battle Royale describes a hypothetical scenario in which teenagers are forced onto an island to play a sickening "game". Fitted with "explosive collars" they are informed that they have exactly three days to kill all other participants or otherwise all explosive collars are automatically activated. Explosions are also triggered if any teenagers decide to subvert the game. As expected, a brutal massacre ensues in which some teenagers enjoy the killing process, others feel forced to kill by the sheer fear of being killed themselves, some commit suicide out of desperation whilst others seek to subvert the game and get killed by their exploding collars. Above all, this film shows what happens if an "ultimate competition" is implemented: i.e. a competition over *life itself*.

Using Battle Royale as an analogy for everyday life under neoliberalism may appear an unfair exaggeration, yet there are striking similarities between the artificial and deadly game played in Battle Royale and the situation of individuals under neoliberalism. These parallels are captured, firstly, in the fact that in Battle Royale there, again, *must* be winners and losers: the winner survives whilst the losers die. Brown (2015) suggests that in our contemporary neoliberal society the distinction of society into 'winners and losers' is paramount. This parallel between Battle Royale and our contemporary situation becomes even clearer when taking into consideration that under neoliberalism economic survival is increasingly connected with physical survival:

> 'where there are only capitals and competition among them, not only will some win while others lose (*inequality and competition unto death* replaces equality and commitment to protect life), but some will be rescued and resuscitated, while others will be cast off or left to perish (owners of small farms and small businesses, those with underwater mortgages, indebted and unemployed college graduates).' (Brown, 2015:72; emphasis added)

Whilst the competitive situation in Battle Royale is extreme, under neoliberalism most people are perpetually confronted with what happens if they fail to adapt to the current economic climate and fail to find employment. For example, I consider the following journal entry:

> *"Today I walked home from university to the station. It seems to me that homelessness is exacerbating daily. I walked past at least 8 homeless people which creates two things for me. The first is a feeling of guilt when walking past and not giving money. That is, even though I usually give one person money, I still feel guilty for the rest. The other realisation is that I would do almost anything not to end up in the same situation myself."* (Excerpt 26. My research diary)

This also, yet again, resonates with Foucault's (2009:42) assertion that the 'scarcity-scourge disappears', but that individual instances of hunger must not disappear. Homelessness may, indeed, be part of this neo-liberal technology of government in that it functions as an example which aims to instil fear in people (i.e. to become homeless) and enhance compliance because of this fear. If people see the alternative to a stressful, unfulfilling job, they will still prefer that job over being cast onto the street. Similarly, if lecturers see that another colleague is

made redundant because she or he failed to raise good student feedback, they will work harder to produce good student feedback. The event of resistance may be prevented by always making sure that "collateral damage" prevails and is visible.

In conclusion, neoliberalism has the capacity to infiltrate every sphere of human existence. Through this emergence of a neo-liberal subjectivity, we are all re-framed as self-investing and responsibilised (and, as Brown (2015) argues actually no longer entrepreneuring) individuals. One aspect of this is that all members of a nation-state (and, as I will argue later, nation-states themselves) become competitors, sellers and buyers. For example, when I am at university "I become the service provider who sells a good student experience" (My research diary) whilst when I am shopping for perfume for my wife, I become the demanding and somewhat rude customer who may not even say thank you:

> *"Yesterday, I went Christmas shopping. I got so increasingly annoyed with the prices for everything and the general frenzy of buying Christmas presents for everyone (it's all so expensive) that I was thinking to myself, if I'm already paying so much for perfume, I at least want to be treated well (after all the customer is king, right?) as a compensation of feeling rather unhappy about the lack of money each month." (Excerpt 27. My research diary)*

In short, and put slightly simplistically, it is not only that neoliberalism (i) makes most people poorer and/or less secure, (ii) commercialises everything, (iii) increasingly corrupts political decisions and (iv) destabilises society by excessive levels of financial risk-taking (Brown, 2015), it also colonises how we think about ourselves (as human capital), others (as competitors) and politics (to grow the economy).

4.3   Conclusion: The NSS as a Neo-Liberal-Disciplinary Amalgam

This chapter hitherto showed how Foucault's notion of "governmentality" could be utilised to theorise the effects of the National Student Sur-

vey (NSS). The NSS was first analysed as a "disciplinary governmentality" and then as a (neo)liberal governmentality. The disciplinary character of the NSS was shown to be embodied in that "student feedback systems" (such as Student Representative Meetings (SRMs), Internal Surveys and the NSS) utilise "normalising judgement", "hierarchical observation" and "examinations". It was argued that, as a result, university lecturers became increasingly compliant by making the achievement of student satisfaction their priority. Secondly, a new dimension was brought into the analysis by considering Foucault's work on liberal and neo-liberal "governmentality". Here, it was suggested that the NSS governs the academic population by, for example, pitching lecturers, departments and universities against one another within competitive artificial markets (cf. neo-liberalism). That is, by using the principles of economic market "freedoms", these freedoms simultaneously avoid large-scale (academic) civil unrest (because most lecturers, by default, produce a normative "acceptable" comparable feedback) whilst also producing important collateral damage to function as "warnings" along the lines of "look what happens if you don't produce good student feedback".

The question now arises how these different governmentalities could be thought together. Fittingly, Foucault's (2009:107) lecture series of 1978 already suggests not to think of sovereignty, discipline and liberal governmentality as separate historical epochs in which a 'society of sovereignty' is replaced by 'a society of discipline' which is then replaced by 'a society, say, of [liberal] government'. Rather these different governmentalities comprise a

> 'triangle: sovereignty, discipline, and (liberal) governmental management, which has population as its main target and apparatuses of security as its essential mechanism' (p. 143).

Whilst discipline was operational in the emerging institutions of 'schools, workshops, [and] armies', it 'was never more valued than when the attempt was made to manage the population …' (p. 143).

Similarly, 'disciplinary techniques' are 'contemporaneous with' and 'bound up with' liberalism'. For example, Jeremy Bentham, towards the end of his life, proposes 'that the Panopticon should be the formula for the whole of [liberal] government' (p. 67). This government should 'give way to … [natural, i.e. liberal] mechanisms' and not interfere apart from supervising' (p. 67). Only if this credo of non-interference proves to be ineffective, the government should actively intervene by subjecting individuals to discipline or even "domination" (cf. Lemke, 2002).

As was argued above, in the context of the NSS, lecturers also may be free to do what they want, but only as long as they produce positive student feedback (i.e. the liberal idea of freedom within the neo-liberal framework of artificially created quasi-markets is operational). However, if this attempt to raise feedback does not produce results, lecturers may then be subjected to disciplinary power in the shape of "disciplinary hearings" or "disciplinary procedures". If this disciplinary process also proves unsuccessful, then perhaps harsher "sovereign" logics may be applied, such as redundancy, potentially leading to more radical forms of precarity, such as homelessness.

Perhaps, however, what happens in contemporary HEIs (and in society more generally) is something which Foucault could not have predicted in his own time: the proliferation of ranking practices facilitated through technology. This concluding section, thus, suggests that what happens in the NSS is that neo-liberal governmentality and discipline have morphed into a new *amalgamated hybrid*. At Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), this "neo-liberal-disciplinary governmentality" may, for example, entail artificially created markets (such as the NSS) (cf. neo-liberalism) which operate within tightly controlled parameters (cf. discipline). More specifically, it could be (schematically) suggested that neo-liberal governmentality is at play in that universities, faculties, departments, programmes and lecturers are pitched against one another in *competitive struggles* over positive student ratings and, indirectly, future student numbers (and, hence, income streams). This neo-liberal governmentality simultaneously utilises "disciplinary

power" in that the government/senior management nexus instrumentalise the panoptic gaze of students to normalisingly judge lecturers and departments by ranking them on league tables. Importantly, the intention is not to make these entities into "better" people or institutions, but to enhance their "performance" and competitive standing (cf. neo-liberalism) within these very tables. If lecturers perform well, they are framed as winners (cf. Brown, 2015) and those who perform towards the bottom of the scale are framed as 'losers' (which is a typical effect of neo-liberalism). The losers may be put under additional surveillance (discipline) to enhance their competitive standing (neo-liberalism). At all times, all universitarian actors are under continuous pressure to enhance their "human capital" to further improve their competitive standing (neo-liberalism) within, however, highly systematised and clearly visible rankings which, of course, operate through normalising judgement (i.e. discipline).

In a wider societal context, rating and ranking practices of services and products have similarly proliferated. This is captured in the following research diary excerpt:

> *"Just in the last month, I received a dozen requests to rate services and products. To just mention a few examples the following companies asked me to rate them: Amazon regarding the products I purchased; British Gas about the experience when they fitted a new electricity line (they also asked the question whether staff took off their shoes), Google Maps asked me to say how Aldi was today. And these were just the instances I remembered." (Excerpt 28. My research diary)*

Importantly, these individual ratings often accrue into an average rating. These average ratings, in return, guide people's choices and are difficult to resist. For example, a restaurant's two-star rating on "Trip Advisor" – an online customer review website which rates restaurants, hotels and other hospitality related venues - would deter me from dining there. Likewise, when my wife and I recently failed to check whether a restaurant was on Trip Advisor – which it was not – this restaurant turned out to be of appalling quality. These rating and ranking practices sometimes have negative outcomes: a restaurant owner, for example, complained that she was often less likely to urge "rude"

customers to leave the premises because of being scared that these customers then leave a poor review of her restaurant.

Interestingly, on some of these rating and ranking internet platforms, such as Airbnb, customers do not only rate the individual company or service provider, but the company also rates the customer. For example, on my family's last holiday in Spain, Airbnb did not only ask us to rate the apartment we stayed at, but also allowed the host to reciprocally provide a rating (including comment) for us, based on how tidy we left the house and how satisfied the host was with us. In other words, hosts and guests rate one another reciprocally with potential consequences for both parties. Porges (2016) for example, suggests that hosts may be driven into "burnout" by Airbnb reviews. Similarly, the taxi-company Uber implemented processes in which both customers and taxi drivers rate each other on the experience of their shared car journey with anxiety-inducing effects on both parties (Hunt, 2016).

This returns this discussion to Charlie Brooker's Nosedive (2016) which was presented in the beginning of this thesis. In this dystopian depiction of the future, reciprocal rating practices have infiltrated the entire social body in that not only commodity exchanges but all human interactions are rated. As mentioned above, this type of social scoring system is already being trialled in China where, in one instance, a school denied access to a child from parents who were deemed "anti-social" based on their social citizen scores (Bisset, 2018). I will now briefly outline how the proposed amalgam of Foucault's disciplinary and neo-liberal governmentalities is embodied in Nosedive.

Beginning with disciplinary governmentality, "Hierarchical Observation" is omnipresent in that everyone in Nosedive wears augmented reality contact lenses, making visible everyone else's scores *at all times* (just like the NSS, where scores and rankings are there for everyone to see on a scale from 1 - 5). Second, smartphones make it possible to rate others for even the slightest transgression: when Lacie loses her composure and starts swearing at an airport, people nearby instantly rate her down. In Foucault's (1977) words, she got "observed"

(by bystanders) and "normalisingly judged" (i.e. rated down). Put differently, Foucault's panoptical principle of "eyes that cannot be seen" is universalised into all realms of social interactions (in which everyone judges and is judged).

Importantly, alongside this universalisation, formal and informal hierarchies co-exist and are even somewhat systematised. For instance, people with higher scores possess more "rating-impact" than those with lower scores: at some point, Lacie is rated negatively by high scoring "Bets" simply for "trying a little bit too hard". This significantly affects Lacie's score (and her anxiety levels). Similarly, traditional hierarchies persist. Returning to the airport scene, a security police officer punishes Lacie for swearing by temporarily deducting one point off Lacie's score.

Moving on, Nosedive also exhibits elements of liberal and neo-liberal governmentality. For instance, Lacie enjoys a certain "freedom", albeit in a drastically reinterpreted form: whilst in liberal societies freedom was focussed on the accumulation of wealth (Foucault, 2009), the freedom in Nosedive is focussed on the accumulation of positive ratings. In addition, these ratings "competitise" (cf. neo-liberalism) society by producing winners (e.g. those who are given cancer treatments, are able to attain attractive housing) and losers (cf. Brown, 2015). This competitisation makes everyone into *homo œconomicus* - i.e. the self-investing entrepreneur who attempts to invest into his or her own human capital (i.e. her or his rating score) - by calculating which action gives the biggest "return on investment" (i.e. a higher score) (Brown, 2015). However, this neo-liberal rationality (of competition) is merged with a disciplinary element in which everyone is instantly able to (panoptically) compare himself or herself to everyone else.

Going beyond Foucault's (2008) conception of neo-liberalism, certain other aspects of neoliberalism (without a hyphen) – such as wealth inequality - appear entangled with the social scoring system in Nosedive. For instance, Naomi, a person with a very high score, is getting married on her fiancé's *private island* whilst Lacie, with a lower score, is finding it difficult to afford decent housing. In addition, poor

ratings may result in exclusions from the workplace – i.e. a low score simply denies people access to their office – which in return denies them the ability to earn a wage. Consequentially, the constant risk of downwards mobility (both in terms of ratings and wealth) keeps people in check (they are disciplined), just like in contemporary society where the fear of unemployment may keep people from taking collective action. In short, those neoliberal aspects – i.e. those aspects which were not yet as prevalent at Foucault's time of writing, such as downwards mobility – may function as part of my suggested disciplinary-neo-liberal hybrid. Just like pupils in 18th-century military schools became disciplined by the constant threat of being relegated to one of the "lower classes", the prospect of "being relegated" into unemployment contributes to peoples' docility.

This closes this chapter. The following chapter will now discuss another logic which operates through the NSS: that of antagonism (Laclau, 2005). Importantly, antagonism will be presented as another governmentality operating alongside the disciplinary and neo-liberal governmentalities discussed above.

Chapter 5   The NSS as an Antagonistic Governmentality

> 'Populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such.' (Laclau, 2005:67)

> 'It is through the demonization of a section of the population that a society reaches a sense of its own cohesion.' (p. 70)

> 'A credible alternative to the neoliberal order […] requires drawing new political frontiers and acknowledging that there cannot be a radical politics without the definition of an adversary. That is to say, it requires the acceptance of the ineradicability of antagonism.' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014:xvi-xvii)

Dīvide et īmpera (Divide and Rule) is a ubiquitous saying and has been utilised in the study of political processes (cf. Xypolia, 2016). Through Laclau's work, it acquires further plausibility. By building on the previous chapter which theorised the NSS as a disciplinary and neo-liberal governmental hybrid, this chapter argues that the NSS also operates as an "antagonistic technology". This analysis seeks to shed further light on how the NSS affects lecturers, departments and universities.

Laclau's work has gained some moderate popularity in education in recent years. For example, there have been publications in the context of education policy research (Clarke, 2012; Baldacchino, 2017; Sokhanwar et al., 2018), educational philosophy and theory (Szkudlarek, 2007, 2011, 2016, 2018; Rømer, 2011; Mårdh and Tryggvason, 2017); citizenship education (Sant and Hanley, 2018); "trust schools" (Warren et al., 2011); and radical democratic education (Snir, 2017)

Crucial to the notion of antagonism is that group identities tend to emerge when the members of those groups commonly oppose another entity. Thus, antagonism is akin to the notion of competition in that they both involve an enemy, an outside force which prevents people from fulfilling their desire. However, whereas in competition one group sees another group as their enemy because both groups have the same desire (e.g. to defeat each other, to gain the favour of other people, to gain customers), in antagonistic relations one group rejects another group because the latter keeps the former from fulfilling its

desire. Most importantly, in antagonism it is precisely through this rejection, that group identities emerge in the first place.

This chapter argues that in the NSS both logics operate simultaneously, and that it is precisely through this simultaneity that lecturers become increasingly isolated. Put bluntly, lecturers develop an antagonism towards students (as the enemy), yet this antagonism fails to create the typical connectivity with other lecturers (because they are competitors). In a nutshell then, there is this new strange type of antagonism: *an antagonism without populism.* In addition, this chapter suggests that when competition and antagonism operate simultaneously, this combination promotes antagonisms at lower levels of scale whilst diffusing antagonisms at higher levels of scale. Put briefly, large-scale resistance of problematic policies, such as the NSS (or the TEF) are avoided whilst "keeping everyone busy" in antagonisms and competitions at lower levels of scale.

This chapter starts with an elucidation of Laclau's work on his notion of "antagonism" and "populism". Next, SETs will be explored as technologies which promote antagonisms between students and lecturers. This chapter ends with a question. How can a large-scale antagonism be created that critiques precisely the macro processes which are the causation of other antagonisms at micro and meso levels of scale? The only tenable option, consistent with Laclau's (2005) logic, is to temporarily give up on the specificity of localised issues and to create a popular demand around what Laclau calls an "empty signifier".

5.1   An Introduction to Laclau's Antagonism

In "On Populist Reason", Laclau (2005:ix) seeks to address 'the nature and logics of the formation of collective identities' through his notion of "antagonism" and his reworking of the notion of "populism". Crucial to Laclau's understanding of antagonism is his take on *discourse*. Discourse, according to Laclau (2005), constitutes objectivity and, importantly, is not restricted to writing or speech. Instead, it describes

'any complex of elements in which [differential] *relations* play the constitutive role' (68, emphasis in original): 'elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it' (p. 68). By extending Saussure's assertion that there are 'no positive terms in language, only differences' (ibid.) from its linguistic orientation to all acts of signification, Laclau maintains that '*something is what it is only through its differential relations to something else*' (p. 68, emphasis added). In other words, 'an action is what it is only through its differences from other possible actions' or 'signifying elements – words or actions' (ibid.). These other actions or signifying elements 'can be successive or simultaneous' (ibid.). Either way, identities are always "differential identities".

This is where Laclau's concept of *antagonism* comes into play. Antagonism is discursive (i.e. fundamentally concerned with "relations") in that it builds on the opposition of another entity. Therefore, antagonism needs to be delineated from (i) real oppositions and (ii) contradictions (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014:124). "Real opposition" describes the opposition of 'real objects' with each object having its own positive identity (p. 108), such as two cars crashing into each other. "Contradiction", on the other hand, happens at 'a logico-conceptual level' (p. 108). In a contradiction, 'the relation of each term with the other exhausts the reality of both' (ibid.). The difference between real opposition and contradiction is that the former comprises "real objects" whereas the latter relates to "concepts". Whilst in contradictions 'concepts can contradict one another', real objects cannot; for instance, 'no real object exhausts its identity by its opposition to another object' (p. 109).

Antagonism is structurally different. Antagonism cannot be equated to real opposition because 'there is nothing antagonistic in a crash between two vehicles: it is a material fact obeying positive physical laws'. Similarly, it would be problematic to equate "class struggle" (an antagonism) with 'the physical act by which a policeman hits a worker militant' (p. 109). Likewise, contradictions and antagonism cannot be equated either. For instance, two groups may hold 'mutually

contradictory belief systems, and yet no antagonism emerges from these contradictions' (p. 109). How is antagonism different from real opposition and contradiction? *In an antagonism, 'the presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being totally myself'* (p. 127; emphasis added). The existence of this "Other" is neither a contradiction – i.e. the other clearly exists – nor is the "Other" a simple positive entity, such as a physical force which is put to rest by a counterforce. Rather, antagonism is captured in the example where a landowner expels a peasant 'from his land' (p.127). Because the 'peasant cannot be a peasant' any longer (p. 127), he develops an antagonism towards the landowner.

In short, antagonism can be understood as follows: there is an antagonism (i.e. an antagonistic relation) if there is a perceived opposing force which prevents one person from becoming the person she or he wants to be. In other words, as long as 'there is antagonism, I cannot be a full presence for myself' (p. 127).

On this foundation, Laclau builds his understanding of populism. More specifically, he describes how antagonistic relations can promote the emergence of group identities by introducing the difference between "*democratic demands"* and *"popular demands".* Democratic demands describe isolated demands, regardless of whether they are 'satisfied or not' (Laclau, 2005:73). In other words, the antagonism exists between whoever is the demanding entity and something else, i.e. the opposing force. For example, a 'group of people' may share a problem (for example with housing) and demand a 'solution' from the local government (p. 73). Importantly, this demand exists *in isolation* from the demands of other groups of people. Moreover, if this democratic demand for housing is met, it ceases to exist, simply because the opposing force stops being an opposing force.

What happens, however, if this democratic (i.e. isolated) demand remains unmet for a longer period? Laclau suggests that this opens the possibility for the emergence of *popular demands.* Returning to the example of unmet needs with housing, popular demands arise when people, for instance, 'start to perceive that their neighbours have other,

equally unsatisfied demands – problems with water, health, schooling, and so on' (Laclau, 2005:73). This, in return, may establish an '*equivalential* relation … between' the demands' of the different groups of people' (ibid.). In short, the initial *isolated* democratic demands are replaced by *shared* popular ones. These popular demands emerge, as in the example above, through the people's rejection of – i.e. their antagonism towards - a common enemy, in this case, for instance, their local authority.

How can the notion of antagonism now facilitate an understanding of the logic of larger-scale populism? Two notions are crucial to understand this logic: empty and floating signifiers. To give a larger-scale example of a populist logic, Laclau draws on the pre-revolutionary situation in 20th century Russia. Here, Tsarism – as the 'oppressive regime' - is separated by an antagonistic 'frontier from the demands of most sectors of society' (Laclau, 2005:130). Even though each of these sectors has a particular demand that 'is different from all the others' – for example, one group may simply demand "political freedom" (but is denied this) whilst another demands food (but goes hungry) - they share a 'common opposition to the oppressive regime' (p. 131). This common rejection of the regime enables '*equivalential links*' between the groups, resulting in what Laclau calls an '*equivalential chain*' (p. 77; emphasis added). Importantly, however, these "equivalential links" are only possible because of one important process: *one* specific demand suddenly becomes the symbol – i.e. the signifier - for the demands of all the other groups. For example, the slogan "Peace, Bread, Land" may come to represent the demands of all groups (including that group which simply demands political freedom and may, in fact, not be hungry). Laclau terms this specific demand, which comes to represent all demands, an *empty signifier*. That is, an empty signifier does not refer to any signified - i.e. a specific idea - because an empty signifier means something different for each of the groups (also see Srnicek and Williams, 2016).

It is this logic by which one signifier "steps in" to represent the whole of society in relation to an antagonistic force (which denies society this wholeness) which Laclau calls *hegemony*. To develop this notion of hegemony further, I return to Laclau's idea of the emergence of a popular identity through the latter's shared antagonism towards something else. Here, one section of society is demonised so that 'a society reaches a sense of its own cohesion' (p. 70). In other words, this section becomes 'an excluded one, something that the totality expels from itself in order to constitute itself' (p. 70). This excluded section is what Laclau refers to as the *constitutive outside* and is precisely the reason how any group forms its own sense of identity. That is, this type of populist group identity needs something which the group collectively rejects in order to form equivalential links between its constituent parts (i.e. between what would otherwise be a range of differential identities). This is where Laclau injects his notion of hegemony. Hegemony is the process in which

> 'one difference, without ceasing to be a *particular* difference, assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality. In that way, its body is split between the particularity which it still is and the more universal signification of which it is the bearer. This operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification is what I have called *hegemony*.' (Laclau, 2005:70; emphasis in original)

This now makes it possible to develop Laclau's understanding of a *floating signifier*. Whilst there was a very clear antagonistic frontier between the People and the Tsar family resulting in an 'equivalential chain' between different sectors of society, in other populist configurations the antagonistic frontier is not as "clear-cut" but rather blurred. In these examples, one 'equivalential chain' can be disrupted by another equivalential chain (p. 131) (by a rival hegemonic project) *which tries to constitute a different antagonistic force as the root of unmet particular demands.* This happened with the ascendance of the right-wing populism in the 1950 movements against the American New Deal which Laclau uses to show how "floating signifiers" operate. Floating signifiers are 'signifiers whose meaning is "suspended"' in the sense that the meaning of the signifier is 'indeterminate between alternative

equivalential frontiers' (p. 131). For example, in 1950s right-wing populism, the signifier of the 'small man' *vis-à-vis* the power of the elites becomes increasingly disconnected from the discourse of the left (i.e. the American New Deal) and attaches itself instead to a right-wing discourse (p. 131). In this right-wing discourse, the Western liberal left-wing elite becomes the antagonistic force against which the popular identity is constructed. It is important to notice that this example demonstrates how democratic demands remained unchanged (people were still struggling with the same issues), whereas popular demands were constructed around a different 'equivalential chain' (Laclau, 2005:131). Which equivalential chain the democratic demands will eventually become attached to (and which empty signifier comes to represent this chain) is contingent on the 'hegemonic struggle' (p. 132) between two rival 'hegemonic projects' (p. 131). Put bluntly, it could be suggested that in the contemporary United States – and other European countries for that matter - people are struggling over a variety of specific unmet democratic demands (e.g. as argued above: longer working hours, less income, less job security, omnipresent competition, demand for safety from gun crime etc.). However, which equivalential chain (and associated popular demand) people attach their democratic demands to depends on who wins the hegemonic struggle. Trump offered the antagonism of the "liberal elitist left", "immigrants" and outside competitors (Europe, China, etc.) and won the election. However, there is also a rival hegemonic project underway by Bernie Sanders who offers the antagonism of "the billionaire Elite".

5.1.1 Modifications to Laclau's Framework

Before, moving to this chapter's analysis, there is the necessity to modify Laclau's framework slightly. This modification concerns the rather arbitrary nature of when exactly something becomes a populism and when it does not. I suggest that populism is by no means restricted to large-scale examples; instead, I propose that antagonisms and populism can exist *at all levels of scale*. That is, against Laclau's assertion

that popular identities can only emerge amongst larger population sizes, it is suggested that the principle of populism may operate *irrespective of scale*. That is, I ask the blunt question, "How many people need to support a political idea so that this idea can be called populist? Are five or 500,000 supporters enough, or does it take 1,000,000 or even 2,000,000?" I, therefore, suggest that popular logics can operate at even the smallest group level.

I furthermore propose that scale still matters, but only in that it *affects the degree to which a signifier becomes empty*: *the larger the amount of differing democratic demands, the "emptier" the signifier needs to be*. That is, an empty signifier needs to hold all different groups and their demands together in an equivalential chain. If those different groups do not significantly vary in their democratic demands, the signifier similarly does not need to be that "empty". For example, in a hypothetical small company one colleague may be struggling with childcare arrangements, whilst another is struggling with an excessive workload and wants better working conditions whilst a third suffers with anxiety due to the perceived threat of losing his job. All three colleagues are confronted with an unresponsive power, i.e. their boss, who refuses to meet these demands. As a result, the three colleagues may now stand up and confront their boss over these issues and demand "better working conditions". This signifier – i.e. "better working conditions" - is already somewhat emptier than the original concrete democratic demands. At a larger scale, on the other hand, there may be a country where one group of people are struggling with hunger and demand food whilst others suffer under political persecution and demand freedom whilst yet another group may be suffering under racial discrimination and demand equality. These groups may come together under an increasingly empty signifier, such as "Freedom". Even though freedom does not necessarily address, for instance, those issues of hunger and the specific demand for food, it still may come to represent these.

5.2 The NSS as an Antagonistic Technology

This section now discusses how the NSS could be viewed through Laclau's notions of antagonism and populism. I would like to begin by considering four excerpts from Lisa's research diary:

> "this particular class does not seem to have anything in common and the students simply do not speak much to each other. The few conversation[s] which I managed to overhear were about certain students showing off their amazing holidays or talking about something that happened to them on their journey to university." (Excerpt 29. Lisa's research diary, October, 2016)

> "After the session, a student came to see me and talked about the fact that she was concerned about her assignment." (Excerpt 30. Lisa's research diary, November, 2016)

> " I am teaching this one class in which one group of students frequently complains about another group of students for being noisy and disrespectful. What I found interesting is that their friendship inside the group appeared to be strengthened through their animosity towards the other group. Honestly, I wasn't even aware of the fact that this group existed until they told me that they really did not like the other group. I also found it interesting that there was a strong emotional bond between the students, i.e. they passionately expressed their shared rejection of the rudeness of the other group. For example, after the [noisy] group had left the classroom, the other group stayed behind telling me that they found their behaviour so rude, especially towards me. I particularly remember one student who appeared flustered and angry whilst saying "I think it's disgusting. They were just so rude towards you." (Excerpt 31. Lisa's research diary, March, 2017)

> "The group I was writing about earlier (i.e. the group that were complaining about the other group) were now increasingly doing social activities with one another. One student, for example, told me that they were all going on a night out together." (Excerpt 32. Lisa's research diary, March, 2017)

The above sequence of journal entries exemplifies a prototypical model of the emergence of my suggested "small-scale antagonism" in which a group identity may emerge based on their common rejection of another group. That is, when the students first met their group in their first year, there were only 'purely differential' (Laclau, 2005:69) student identities because each student defined his or her own identity in relation to everyone else (Excerpt 29). Whilst some initial identifications might have formed based on clothes, demeanour etc., student demands were expressed on a largely differential level. For instance,

a student approached Lisa whilst only expressing an individual democratic demand, i.e. "assignment anxiety" (and not a group demand) (Excerpt 30).

After a few months, however, friendship groups began to emerge as is implied in "Excerpts 31 and 32". Importantly, some of these groups appeared to share an animosity towards a "noisy and disrespectful" group, prompting one group of students to approach Lisa with their concern that "they found a certain group's behaviour so rude". Implied in this concern was a *demand* for more polite student behaviour and the emergence of a tentative group identity. More specifically, although this specific group identity may have emerged on the basis of a range of factors (this can only be suggested tentatively because there is limited data available here), it could be hypothesised that the student group *partly* emerged on the basis of their shared antagonism of another group. Importantly, there was a strong affective dimension in the students' rejection (for instance, one student appeared "flustered and angry"). This affective dimension created a "strong emotional bond between the students" which managed to maintain itself beyond the confines of the classroom; these students were now going "on a night out together".

In addition, it could be hypothesised that before the emergence of their friendship group, these individual students may well have been secretly frustrated with the behaviour of this other group of students. In other words, the members of the former group of students may have secretly demanded "more respect" or a "quieter work environment". However, precisely because these students did not speak much to each other, their demands *remained isolated.* In other words, individual students' demands for respectful behaviour remained only '*democratic demands'* (Laclau, 2005:125) precisely because they remained isolated. When students, however, started to increasingly speak to one another, one student, for example, may have realised that another student also found the behaviour of certain "noisy students" disrespectful. This opened up the potential for the emergence of an antagonism and

a "popular demand" (i.e. "more respect"). That is, akin to Laclau's example in which one group of people struggles with housing and realises that another group may struggle with water (see section 5.1), the moment each 'well-behaved" student realised that the other "well-behaved" students also found the "disrespectful students" irritating, a shared group identity could emerge. Alongside this, a popular demand emerges:

> *"We had a student representative meeting the other day. One of the overarching negative feedback was that the class felt really annoyed by a small minority of students who they perceived to be really disrespectful." (Excerpt 33. Lisa's research diary)*

In short, the common rejection of the "noisy group" by the rest of the group (i.e. the 'silent majority' (Laclau, 2005:87) of the class) was the basis on which these students could form their equivalential chain around the "popular demand" for more respect.

Empty Signifiers. Importantly, each student who belonged to that group needed to maintain his or her *democratic demands* and associated individual antagonisms to keep the *popular demand* alive. For example, one student may simply be annoyed by the slang used by more "working class noisy students":

> *"I overheard a conversation on one table where one posher sounding student made fun of the accent of another student on another table. The latter student said something along the lines of "I thought that this was just much better (whilst pronouncing the t with a glottal stop). The other student then was quietly mimicking [the pronunciation of the other student] whilst saying "they are just so rough"". (Excerpt 34. Lisa's research diary)*

Another student may simply find the excessive talking annoying:

> *"[student A] complained to her fellow student, on the way out, that she finds this talking of [student x] really annoying and that she couldn't concentrate." (Excerpt 35. Lisa's research diary)*

Yet another student may be worried about her assignment. Lisa remarked that one student approached her after a session:

> *"This student approached me today and said, "I'm finding it very difficult to concentrate, and I'm getting really worried about the upcoming assignment." (Excerpt 36. Lisa's research journal)*

Yet, each of these 'democratic demands', expresses itself in more general signifiers which are emptier than the concrete antagonisms: the behaviour of the other students is now simply "rude" whilst rude may signify "working class accent" or "excessive talking" or "the reason why I cannot concentrate and might fail my assignment". In other words, the popular demand structures itself around the notion of "more respect" which may mean "less working-class accent" or "less talking".

Floating Signifiers. Interestingly, as Lisa's group progressed into their final year, the antagonistic frontier between various groups of students shifted. It could be suggested that it is here where the operation of Laclau's *floating signifiers* could be observed:

> *"The group representatives have now definitely complained against my teaching which they found too abstract and as I was told, "too intellectual". Whilst I'm assuming that this has mainly to do with some anxiety regarding the upcoming assignments, there also could be another interpretation. I went down exactly the same trap that classroom teachers go down: to increase teach[ing] time and decrease time for group discussion. The most striking thing, apart from feeling a little bit hurt about not being accepted by a group was that there appeared a real sense of unity between the members of the group in their rejection of myself. In a student representative meeting, the student reps of my group found out that other groups were really enjoying their units whilst my group did not. Interestingly, through word of my colleagues I was told that even groups who did not get on originally (in fact, in the first year there was a real witch hunt against another group inside this class) agreed that my teaching was too hard and that they were worried about the assignment." (Lisa's research diary)*

The operation of Laclau's "floating signifiers" can be delineated when observing the shifting of the group's antagonism from (i) the "noisy students" towards (ii) Lisa. That is, in their first year, the "chatty students" (who were in the minority) emerged as the antagonistic force which simultaneously made the popular camp (the rest of the class) emerge as a group. This antagonism (i.e. the antagonistic frontier) was now shifting in the students' final year which figured Lisa *vis-à-vis* (Laclau, 2005:77) the students. More specifically, in their final year, the students felt that a range of specific demands were frustrated.

> *"Many students feel really tense at the moment. One of the students admitted that this largely had to do with the upcoming assignments.*

They really don't want to feel that overwhelmed." (Excerpt 37. Lisa's research diary)

"One of my students was in tears today. She told me that she had to have a part time job which she needed to buy food. But this job kept her from studying. She said she wished that she wouldn't have to work." (Excerpt 38. Lisa's research diary)

"Today, a range of students said that they wanted easier text[s] and complained about how hard the [last] academic text was. They said that they didn't understand a word." (Excerpt 39. Lisa's research diary)

Interestingly, some of these demands were still structured around the same democratic demands from year 1. For example, some students still felt anxious about their assignments. There also were a few new democratic demands around finding the module too difficult. In short, students felt 'confronted with a dichotomic division between unfulfilled social demands, on the one hand, and an unresponsive power, on the other' (Laclau, 2005:86). As will be made explicit, this "unresponsive power" does not need to be the *actual* power which is responsible for the unfulfilled demand, but only needs to be perceived as such. Which power is perceived as the oppressive force is up to who wins the hegemonic struggle. For example, it could be suggested that it is unlikely that Lisa was the actual culprit of the students' unmet demands in that assignment practices, for instance, were clearly beyond Lisa's control. On the other hand, this exemplifies how antagonistic frontiers may shift by actively intervening in the construction of an antagonistic force.

Floating signifiers at meso and macro contexts. The concept of "floating signifiers" is illuminating when considering these shifts (e.g. the shift from the antagonism against a specific group towards that against Lisa) because they help to explore how antagonisms may break away from the micro-level and instead direct themselves towards entities at meso and macro levels of scale. In other words, whilst the antagonism may change (for example, from seeing the lecturer as the culprit of struggles towards seeing, for example, the university or larger scale practices as the issue), the unmet democratic demands, again, remain intact. Importantly, these democratic (i.e. idiosyncratic) demands remain unmet *regardless* of who is posited as the enemy. In the process,

democratic demands may simply attach themselves to an alternative equivalential chain. For example, in Lisa's excerpts, it could be assumed that students genuinely struggled with their assignment anxiety, with difficult course texts or with a lack of time due to the necessity to juggle a part-time job (all of which result in democratic demands). However, the root (i.e. the antagonism) of these unmet specific (i.e. democratic) demands is in need of construction. That is, who is constructed as responsible - is it another group, the lecturer, the course, the university, or the larger political landscape? – is contingent on which discourse wins the hegemonic struggle.

Accordingly, the popular (i.e. hegemonic) demand is in need of construction. This is connected to the question which "democratic demand" manages to become a "popular demand" in the shape of an "empty signifier" which is able to signify all of the other students' democratic demands. Will the popular demand become, for example, "Fair assignments", "Less Work", "Easier Texts" or "More support". Put differently, antagonistic frontiers can be drawn differently with students seeing the root of their anxiety in varying postulated entities. It would, for example, be easy to picture a situation in which students understand (i.e. construct) that the origin of their assignment anxiety is to do with a more structural issue with high stakes assessments instead of figuring the overtly intellectual nature of Lisa's teaching style as the antagonism. Similarly, students may attribute the fact that they are "struggling to get their reading done" to the necessity to "maintain a part-time job" (and, as a result, would be able to identify with a popular demand for more "state support") instead of figuring the lecturer (or the module) as the root of the problem. In other words, what is potentially "floating" is the perceived antagonistic force (which fails to meet individual demands) and the corresponding signifier around which a popular demand emerges. To see how this may play out in a concrete scenario, I consider the following excerpt:

> "I really like this one year 3 group that I'm teaching. They are really struggling with some of the course content and complain and openly voice these concern[s]; however, they keep on trying and find aspects

they find interesting. Moreover, I feel that students feel that I'm on their side. This may have to do with the fact that I understand their concerns. One student for example, complained about the bad situation at placement. The unit I was teaching on, however, helped the student to understand this situation at a deeper level as she told me later on. Another student also had a bad experience on placement and decided to only graduate with the degree and not with the teacher qualification. He repeatedly told me that my course "blew his mind" and that he is determined to now study something else. In a nutshell, their concerns showed an understanding of the wider factors which constrain their ability to be successful. Another student said that she did not even know what neoliberalism meant before my course. I really feel quite connected to this group and will be sad when they leave." (Excerpt 40. My research diary)

It could be suggested that this connectivity was perhaps built upon yet another operation of a floating signifier and the postulation of wider structural issues as the antagonism. For example, there was a strong sense of rejecting wider issues, such as "issues with external class mentors or headteachers" or "problems with the wider course". In this context, the content of the unit helped to construct antagonisms beyond the university because of its specific critical (perhaps biased?) political orientation of the topics.

The fact that this unit was broadly well-received may also have to do with the fact that, concurrently, (i.e. in Summer 2017), a certain larger-scale enthusiasm with left-wing politics was palpable:

"Today I spoke to one of my students as part of an undergraduate conference which I organised. I remember that our conversation shifted towards Jeremy Corbyn and Labour and said something along the lines of "It's quite interesting what is happening with Labour at the moment". The student instantly said that he thinks that literally everyone in the whole cohort, is supporting Jeremy Corbyn and that he had not heard of a single student who didn't like Corbyn." (Excerpt 41. My research diary)

5.2.1   A Historical Perspective on Higher Education Populisms

This initial discussion of phenomena at micro at meso levels of scale enables us to consider antagonistic/populist developments at even larger scales. Three examples have been picked. One seminal historical and large-scale example of populism in the realm of higher education can be found in the student movements in 1968 Germany - which emerged as part of wider student protests in Europe and the US

- in which antagonisms may have helped to construct the identity of a group (in this case a whole generation). The populist logic in this context is straightforward. Students rose against the establishment which comprised (most) professors, university leadership, their parents and politics more generally (Della Porta, 1999). This animosity towards the "Establishment" was captured in the slogan 'Unter den Talaren - Muff von 1000 Jahren.' ("Under the gowns – the musty odour of a 1000 years") (Nath, 2007:online). Underlying this animosity, there was a generational conflict in which the younger generation accused their parents of remaining silent about their collaborations and complicity in Nazi Germany (Gilcher-Holtey, 2001). Reflexively speaking, this was an important time and I feel deeply attached to the emancipatory undertone and anti-authoritarian stance of the 68 movement regardless of some later definite disappointments.

Turning to Laclau, it could be suggested that the group formation of the 68 movement (i.e. the populist student movement) was contingent on its mutual rejection of the parents' generation. My father always says that the 60s were brilliant because there was a clear enemy (i.e. crypto-fascist parents in general). In his view, nowadays, it is much more difficult to delineate this enemy. That is, in Laclau's understanding of populism the identity of the 68 movement could be understood as being contingent on the postulation of a clear enemy in the shape of the parents' generation.

This emergent antagonism between students' *vis-à-vis* the parents' generation (including universities) was variously expressed in student demonstrations and sometimes brutal government repressions, such as the fatal shooting of 'Benno Ohnesorg' by German police (Della Porta, 1999:72). In this clash, it only occasionally happened that members of the parents' generation managed to cross over to the popular "student camp". In very rare moments, certain lecturers even managed to drive student revolts, such as in the example of artist Joseph Beuys who, together with his students, occupied the vice chancellor's office in 1971 in a small-scale populist movement against university leadership (Riegel, 2013). In other examples, even long-

standing voices on the intellectual left were rejected by certain student factions, poignantly expressed in student boycotts of Adorno's 1969 lectures (Adorno, 1969).

Another example of an emergent "student populism" can be found in the 2010 anti-tuition fee protests. London saw four larger scale mobilisations of students against the planned rise of tuition fees from 3000 to 9000 pounds per annum by the newly formed Conservative-Liberal coalition Government:

> 'In the autumn of 2010, the U.K. coalition government of Conservatives (Tories) and Liberal Democrats introduced radical changes to the way universities would be funded—for example, funding for teaching in the humanities and social sciences was cut by 100 percent and the amount which students have to contribute was raised from £3,000 (US$4,800) to a maximum of £9,000 (US$14,400) per year. Besides this, the U.K. government also decided to scrap the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), a weekly amount college students from low-income families received to stimulate them to continue studying.' (Cammaerts, 2013:531)

In this example, students united behind an "unmet demand", or rather the anticipation thereof: the demand for affordable university education. More specifically, there is the "whole student population", on the one hand, and certain "student groups", on the other. One of these student groups (i.e. a more radical student faction) now managed to successfully form a demand which began to represent an 'incommensurable totality' (Laclau, 2005:70) (i.e. the whole of the student population). In return, the "whole student population" could itself be understood as being a component part of a larger assemblage towards which it stands in a 'part-to-whole relation' (DeLanda, 2006:40) (assemblage theory will be more thoroughly introduced in section 6.1). This larger assemblage could be described as UK "society" itself. It could now be argued that whilst a "part of the student population" managed to represent the "whole student population", it did not manage to "upscale" its reach towards the "whole of society". In short, student protests managed to win the hegemonic struggle at the level of the student population; however, they failed to win at the level of the whole

population. It could be suggested that one of the reasons for the failure of the 2010 protests was that the demand (against the rise of tuition fees) did not successfully connect to other democratic demands of other sectors of society (e.g. fairer working conditions; better housing). In addition, what becomes striking is the role the media played in this process which I consider an indispensable part in this hegemonic struggle (also see Srnicek and Williams, 2016 on this issue). Whilst there was sympathy from a few newspapers (e.g. The Guardian; the Independent), the right-leaning newspapers defamed the student protests with a particular focus on the vandalism of buildings (ibid.).

5.2.2 Contemporary UK Situation

Based on this exploration of two historical examples, how could the possibility for a populism in the current situation at universities be grasped? In other words, is there a possibility of a populist movement which encompasses both lecturers and students *vis-à-vis* a larger antagonistic force? As has been outlined above, populism – including a popular demand – is always contingent on democratic demands. Thus, the further question arises, "What are the current unmet democratic demands of students and lecturers?" Beginning with Lisa's university, I suggest that lecturers at her institution often struggled with large group sizes which led to exacerbating workloads (due to an increase in marking and email writing):

> *"One of my colleagues was almost in tears because of the sheer amount of emails she keeps on receiving from students. She said, "We have to answer them within a few days, but I just can't cope any more with this pace." (Excerpt 42. Lisa's research diary)*

At my university, I similarly remarked:

> *"I really don't know how I'm going to get this done. I have to mark around 90 3000 words essays in 4 weeks." (My research diary)*

Similarly, for students, the democratic demand of "more time for studying" is frustrated due to the necessity to juggle part-time jobs (see above) and an increasingly precarious employment future (Neilson

and Rossiter, 2008). It could be suggested that it might be relatively "easy" for these frustrated lecturer and student "democratic demands" to be transformed into shared "popular demands" (Laclau, 2005). This popular demand would be contingent on equivalential links between students and lecturers which could, for instance, be constructed against a larger antagonistic force of "rich policymakers and university senior leadership". This hypothetical populism may go alongside an identity construction around the empty signifier of, for instance, "hard-working exploited lecturers and ripped off students". That is, whilst the sources of these unmet demands are differential - for example, students may demand "better tuition", "lower tuition fees", and "less exam anxiety" whilst lecturers demand "smaller workload" – in this hypothetical scenario students and lecturers may find their equivalential moment in their common opposition of an antagonistic force (i.e. policy makers and leadership) which could then be constructed as the source of all unmet demands.

Considering this potential for a larger-scale student-lecturer populism, the question arises, "Why is there currently no populist lecturer-student movement?" In other words, *"Which forces work against a populist student-lecturer movement?"* I suggest that two processes are responsible, both related to the NSS: (i) the absorption of democratic demands and (more importantly) (ii) the shifting of the antagonistic frontier through the employment of floating signifiers. This returns the discussion to the operation of student feedback systems. Firstly, intra-institutional student feedback systems, such as SRMs and Internal Surveys, are designed to (i) differentially 'absorb' (Laclau, 2005:89) students' unmet democratic demands and therefore avoid student dissatisfaction in the NSS. That is, akin to Laclau's example of 'agrarian migrants' whose democratic demands cease to exist when they are satisfied – i.e. when they attain 'water, health, [and] schooling' (p. 73) - students who are unhappy with certain modules or tutors, can have their democratic demands met through internal feedback:

> *"At my institution, we have SSCF meetings, which stands for Student Staff Consultative Forums. Essentially, they are meetings where we*

meet with student representatives. A few days ago, I attended one of these meetings. Students, in this case, were not quite happy with how one unit [i.e. a module] was organised. We then publish a 'you said, we did' letter in which we 'close the feedback loop' and show how we attempted to address areas of dissatisfaction with the course. I felt a little bit awkward because certain students were not happy with one lecturer which really puts that lecturer on the spot." (Excerpt 43. My Research diary)

That is, this SSCF platform – which has been discussed in this thesis under the umbrella of Student Representative Meetings (SRMs) - exists to *pre-empt* student dissatisfaction. More specifically, SRMs seek to increase the probability of positive student satisfaction in Internal Surveys (which is important for individual module or unit leaders) and in the NSS (which is important for courses and universities). In Laclau's (2005) words, it could be suggested that SRMs are designed to absorb students' differential, democratic demands. By doing this, the "breeding ground" for larger-scale dissatisfaction is made less fertile, and the emergence of a possible popular demand is made less likely.

Second, SRMs, Internal Surveys and the NSS could be figured as (ii) technologies which *produce certain antagonisms*. Combining this with Foucault's notion of governmentality, student feedback systems could therefore be termed *"antagonistic governmentalities".* For example, SRMs produce antagonisms because they often increase the workload for lecturers in that these must show how student dissatisfaction is going to be addressed. This additional workload, in return, may make it more likely that students are seen as a threat (i.e. as an antagonistic force). Lisa for example remarks:

"I've got a few colleagues who continuously complain about the immaturity of students and how they are often dissatisfied. I must admit I sometimes join in these student slag-off sessions. It feels like quite a relief from when you feel at the mercy of whether students like you or not. When I think of how students have quite a lot of power over you as a lecturer, I always picture Nero who put his thumb up or down to indicate whether gladiators are supposed to live or die." (Excerpt 44. Lisa's research diary)

Modules which fail to produce positive student feedback prompt module leaders into disciplinary action as already discussed in section 4.1.2:

> "In the internal survey, students also judge the modules. This puts quite a lot of pressure on module leaders who are, in a way, made responsible if the score for the module dips below 80%. This happened the other day. It all started when the module leader told us in a meeting that the module dropped below 80%. He seemed agitated and identified a few lecturers who he [the module leader] thought would be responsible for this negative student feedback. Apparently, students mentioned individual lecturers in their internal surveys – even though they are directed not to. The module leader also said that in student rep meetings, students complained about the same lecturers. [The module leader] said that, as a result of the feedback, the degree leader gave them [the underperforming lecturers] a stern talking to. Another outcome of this meeting was that they arranged weekly tutorials with the module leader which they [i.e. the underperforming lecturers] had to attend." (Lisa's research diary)

Lisa spoke to one of these "under-performing" lecturers a few days later, capturing a real sense of resentment.

> "I met [lecturer x] today. He complained that he has so much on anyway and now also needs to attend these tutorials with [the module leader]. [Lecturer x then continued] "and all of this just because of some spoilt students and a panicky [module leader]. It just isn't fair." (Excerpt 45. Lisa's research diary)

Thus, I suggest that Student Representative Meetings (SRMs) and Internal Surveys are actively implicated in the *engineering of lecturers' unmet demands*. For example, in the case of Lisa's colleague, the consequences of bad student feedback meant additional workload for him. This in return made him resent students (and the module leader). In Laclau's words, through problems with workload resulting from student feedback, lecturers *develop* a demand for "less workload" and the demand for "student satisfaction" (because a lack thereof may result in more scrutiny and additional workload). This *engineered* demand went alongside the creation of a similarly engineered antagonism in the shape of the "all-powerful" "never satisfied" "needy" student. Crucially, what is excluded from mattering is the overarching structure (i.e. the specific student feedback systems) as the "real" origin of the unmet demand. In short, there is a causal chain: student feedback systems

create the possibility for students to voice their dissatisfaction -> satisfaction needs to be acted upon because of hierarchical and market pressures -> students are figured as the antagonism -> what gets excluded is the actual feedback technology which produced this type of causal chain in the first place.

In summary, the NSS articulates an equivalential chain amongst lecturers by framing students as the antagonism. However, in comparison to hegemonic projects which actively seek to convince the populus to see a minority as the antagonism (as is the case in Trumpism which attempts to situate immigrants as the source of unmet demands), the NSS functions in a more "automated" manner, not unlike a "computer algorithm". That is, the NSS, once implemented, does not need much government "input" or "maintenance" (unlike the Trump campaign) because it *somewhat automatically produces lecturer antagonisms against students by creating a perpetual urgency to address student dissatisfaction*. Similarly, frequent "student-testing-regimes" produce student antagonisms towards lecturers by creating the perpetual necessity to perform. Without testing, students may be happier, more eager to learn and, as a result, more satisfied. Thus, in both lecturers' and students' antagonisms, the hegemonic struggle is *immanent* in the mechanism of the feedback technique. Part of this automated and reciprocal process (as exemplified in Figure 2) is that (at the institutional and national level) the antagonistic frontier is shifted away from seeing larger scale university leadership and government as the culprit for their unmet demands and rather figure frontline staff or individual courses in this position. This process is to be considered more thoroughly now, staring with Macro policy.
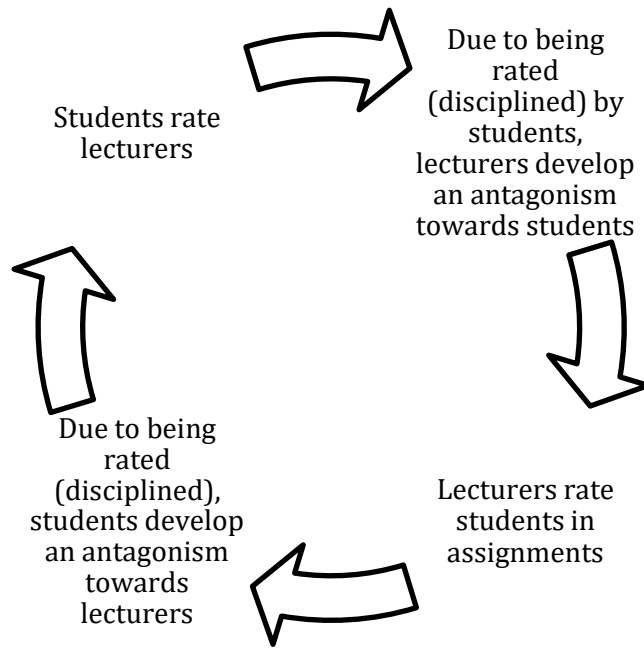
Figure 2 An iterative cycle of antagonism

Macro Level: The NSS. As mentioned before, a populism which entails an alliance between students and lecturers *vis-à-vis* the "policymaking elite" is somehow prevented. How? It could be suggested that the origin of this process lies in national policymaking itself. More specifically, the NSS – which is underpinned by a range of policy documents which situate the reason of "low standards in teaching provision" in a lack of competition between universities (e.g. Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016) – attempts to shift the antagonistic frontier. Instead of the Government being identified as the source of inadequate education universities are framed as the culprit. More specifically, the answer to "low standards" is to establish a neo-liberal logic (as was argued in Chapter 4) by creating competition between universities. Students, in return, are encouraged to choose their university based on league tables and TEF accreditations. In addition, students pay 9000 pounds per year and expect a 'return on investment' (Brown, 2015:192). These distinct policy implementations thus subtly shift all potential "national antagonisms" (i.e. macro antagonisms) away from

the Government and towards universities who become 'responsibil-ised' (Brown, 2015). If students are satisfied, they will give good feed-back and everyone is happy. If they are dissatisfied, however, they can hold their institution (and again not the government) accountable – be-cause, after all, this is who they pay with their money. Lisa remarks:

> *"Today, I overheard a conversation of colleagues who work the primary department. They seemed quite agitated. Apparently, one postgraduate student put his hand up in a lecture theatre and said that he found the lecture a waste of his time and money. The student apparently said, "We are paying 9000 pounds a year and can expect something much better than this." (Excerpt 46. Lisa's research diary)*

In Laclau's words, universities can be held accountable by students for not meeting their 'democratic demand' to be satisfied (Hall, 2017). That is, by containing dissatisfaction strictly within a student *vis-à-vis* the university relationship, the NSS avoids any larger scale dissatis-faction (against the government) by systematically pointing the meta-phorical finger at universities (both in the sense of "Great! You are do-ing well in the league tables" or "Oh dear, you'd better try harder to climb those league tables"). Resulting from this complex interplay of the NSS and accompanying tuition fee rises, universities see students as their customers whom they want to satisfy so that they give good feedback in customer satisfaction surveys (i.e. the NSS).

In an even wider context, it could be suggested that the NSS shifts the focus away from the potential to make neoliberal austerity capital-ism - which itself is expressed in a lack of funding, the raising of tuition fees, a lack of employment rights etc. - the culprit (i.e. the antagonism) of students' unmet demands. Instead, the cause for "low post-gradua-tion employment", "students dropping out of university" and "low stu-dent satisfaction" – all of which are measures which inform the rank-ings and the TEF – is firmly situated in universities themselves and not some other macro tendencies at play. In this antagonistic logic, the Government may succeed in establishing equivalential links with stu-dents by, for example, arguing that universities have for too long shied away from 'high-quality competition' (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016:8). Put pointedly, the Government can now

(together with students) hold universities (as the antagonistic force) to "account" through the technologies of student satisfaction. In short, instead of the culprit being the Government, the culprit *would* (theoretically) become the university. This would be the case if universities and their leaders were not trying to deflect the market pressures down the pyramidal hierarchy of the university (see Chapter 4) which will be tackled in what follows.

Meso Level: Internal Surveys. Due to the NSS induced competitive pressures between universities, and the possibility of an antagonism between each university and its students, universities have implemented Internal Surveys. Similar to the NSS, these Internal Surveys redraw antagonistic frontiers: whereas the NSS (and associated tuition fee rises) produce antagonistic frontiers between universities and students, I argue that Internal Surveys promote antagonistic frontiers between students and modules. That is, I propose that Internal Surveys, yet again, shift those unmet student demands (e.g. assignment anxiety, student precarity) away from seeing the actual university leadership as the antagonism (akin to the Government shifting the antagonism away from itself in the NSS) and towards the supposed "underperformance" of individual modules and courses. That is, individual courses can be identified to achieve lower student satisfaction ratings than other courses and could therefore be made into an antagonistic force.

The scenario in which university leadership shift the responsibility towards modules could be described as the attempt to build an "institutional populism" in which university leaders seek to establish equivalential links between *themselves and students*. This is why, at the university level, we find discourses embodied in banners (e.g. "students are our customers") or "you deserve excellent value for money". Even more poignantly, London Metropolitan University, for example, writes the following in their university strategy:

'If you tell us you are dissatisfied, we will listen and we will respond to what you say. We will launch a module feedback scheme led and administered by students so that you can help improve the quality of our teaching.' (London Metropolitan University, 2015: online)

Put bluntly, through institutional student feedback systems, universities may seek to "make friends" with students by demonising certain "underperforming" modules which may be corrected through 'a module feedback scheme led and administered by students' (ibid.). In addition, modules also draw on further micro technologies, such as Student Representative Meetings (SRMs).

Micro Level: Within these SRMs, university lecturers are figured as inside module antagonisms. More specifically, SRMs shift the "blame" away from module leadership (who, yet again received the "blame" from university leadership, who received the "blame" from inter-university NSS market pressures) to single out individual lecturers as responsible for the negative student feedback. In analogy to the disciplinary characteristic of Student Evaluations of Teaching as explored in Chapter 4, it no longer is the fault of actors at the national, universitarian, course or module level, but the fault is pinpointed in a downwards spiral towards individual lecturers. In short, it could be suggested that there is a continuous deferring of responsibility from the top towards the bottom.

5.3   Conclusion: Alternative Antagonisms beyond the University

This chapter sought to theorise the NSS as an antagonistic technology. That is, the NSS could be understood as an apparatus which seeks to avoid large-scale unrest (such as a national populism against the Government) by deferring conflicts to the institutional level, which, in return, defers it to courses, which, yet again, defer it to individual frontline staff. Put simplistically, it could be suggested that, in conclusion, Laclau's antagonism works akin to the Roman saying "Divide and Rule": by pitching various groups (e.g. lecturers and students) against

one another, the forces in power are excluded from the limelight and are, therefore, safe from becoming the antagonism themselves (i.e. the target of discontent). Again, a large-scale populism is avoided by creating a multitude of miniature antagonisms. This point could be overemphasised by claiming that the government is "triple shielded" by the NSS: if students are unhappy, this unhappiness will firstly show up through Student Representative Meetings (SRMs) internally. Individual leaders will then try everything to address the dissatisfaction because, after all, their careers may be in danger if they don't. If dissatisfaction is not addressed at this level, it will show up in the Internal Surveys where *module leaders* will try everything to address dissatisfaction. If again unsuccessful, dissatisfaction will show up in the actual NSS questionnaire which forces course leaders and university leadership into action.

This allows me to begin to connect Laclau's notion of antagonism to Foucault's work on governmentality by proposing a neologism: an "antagonistic governmentality". That is, I suggest that the NSS does not only govern the academic population (including students and lecturers) through disciplinary governmentality and neo-liberal governmentality (competition), but also through what I call an "antagonistic governmentality" (for a further discussion of my concept see Chapter 7). Put yet differently, akin to my proposed "disciplinary-neo-liberal governmentality" which avoids large-scale civil unrest by pitching lecturers (courses and universities) against one another in competitive struggles within league tables, "antagonistic governmentality" pitches lecturers against students by creating antagonisms. Laclau neither figured populism as something inherently problematic nor positive, but rather understood it not only as 'a political logic', but as 'a necessary ingredient of politics *tout court'* (Laclau, 2005:18). Inherent in this political logic is the necessity of political demands being overdetermined, i.e. covering more than a particular specific demand. Laclau asserts, more generally, that 'there is no social element whose meaning is not overdetermined' (p. 110). This all relates back to Laclau's understanding of democratic demands (i.e. demands that are specific but isolated)

and popular demands (i.e. demands that are vaguer but connected by an equivalential chain).

We could now extend this logic of antagonisms to various other interactions at varying levels of scale. For instance, "inter-country antagonisms", such as wars, may be understood as a structuring device in how identities emerge. Again, in analogy to Freud's delineation of group identity formation, we could say, that it is through the 'demonization of' (Laclau, 2005:70) another country that one's own country develops its sense of cohesion, solidarity and identity.

This ends my Laclauian discussion of the NSS. In the following exploration, I now attempt to make sense of chapters 4 and 5 through a distinctly realist and materialist ontology.

Chapter 6   A (New) Materialist Exploration of the NSS

This slightly more experimental chapter now offers a distinctly realist and materialist take on the NSS. Thus, I explore two "new materialist" frameworks in their suitability to offer alternative insights into the work presented in the preceding chapters. New materialism is an umbrella term for a myriad disparate recent theories which share an interest in analysing the material world including (and often going beyond) the analysis of human matters (e.g. DeLanda, 2006; Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; Meillassoux, 2015). More specifically, I explore Manuel DeLanda's (2006) "assemblage theory" and Karen Barad's (2007) "agential realism" as each theory may offer its distinct contributions towards developing a realist analysis of student feedback systems. I argue that, despite their differences, DeLanda's and Barad's works may resonate fruitfully and complement one another on a range of issues. For instance, I argue that assemblage theory is superior in theorising issues of scale (e.g. how a country relates to its component parts, such as universities) whereas "agential realism" is better equipped to analyse issues of topology (for example, how one university may both be a component part of the UK but cut across the UK state boundary by competing with another university in China).

This chapter first discusses DeLanda's (2006) work and asserts that "assemblage theory" is particularly suitable in clarifying my proposed amalgam of disciplinary, neo-liberal, and antagonistic governmentalities as embodied in the NSS. Second, Karen Barad's "agential realism" will be used to develop a realist ontology to re-theorise the increasing boundary formation between students and lecturers as mentioned in Chapter 5. Hitherto discussed in isolation, both authors will then be read through one another whilst attending to similarities and differences in their respective approaches with the intention of developing a joint realist framework which attends to both issues of "scale" and "topology".

6.1 The NSS as a "Neo-Liberal Disciplinary Assemblage"

Why has assemblage theory been incorporated into this thesis? The answer is twofold. First, I appreciate assemblage theory for its clarity and operationalisability. That is, by building upon and systematising Deleuze and Guattari's work (1988), assemblage theory makes explicit what it is (e.g. it follows a realist and materialist ontology) and what it is not (it rejects, for example, linguistic monism or a radical social constructivism). Second, I suggest that assemblage theory's strongest feature is its capability to theorise events at *micro and macro levels* of scale whilst also showing how these scales *interact with one another*. That is, in the context of this thesis, assemblage theory is well equipped to show how "conversations" between students and lecturers (as "micro assemblages") relate to "university rating and ranking practices" (as "meso assemblages") and "macro assemblages" (e.g. the competitive higher education sector).

I begin by asking the question, "What are assemblages and where do they occur?" Assemblages can be found at varying levels of scale (at the most microscopic and macroscopic). Moreover, they appear in the "natural world" (e.g. water molecules, animal bodies, ecosystems etc.) (DeLanda, 2012, 2016) and the "social world" (e.g. "social encounters", "interpersonal networks", "organisations", "governments", "cities" and "nations") (DeLanda, 2006). Last, they may range temporally - from short-lived encounters (such as "conversations" between two people on a train) to longer lasting entities (such as "cities").

I suggest that the most concise introduction to the concept of assemblages can, however, be provided by considering a natural assemblage: the water molecule (DeLanda, 2012; DeLanda and Harman, 2017). The water molecule exhibits the following features of assemblages (with crucial "assemblage theory terminology in *italics*). First, every assemblage consists of *heterogeneous component parts* which *interact* with one another in a *continuous* fashion. For example, the "water molecule" comprises the *component parts* of one oxygen and two hydrogen atoms which are "stuck together" which is the outcome

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of a *continuous interaction* in which oxygen and hydrogen attract one another through their electric charge. Second, every assemblage has *emergent properties* which come into existence through precisely this interaction of its component parts. However, these properties are not reducible to the properties of the assemblage's parts. For instance, water has the capacity to extinguish fires whereas its component parts display opposite properties (hydrogen and oxygen atoms are both gases that can *incite* fires, i.e. are highly reactive). It follows that the properties of each assemblage are *immanent* (and not transcendental) in that they are the direct result of the interaction of its component parts. Thus, if these component parts stopped interacting, the assemblage would no longer exist: water "disappears" when oxygen and hydrogen stop interacting. Connected to this is that all assemblages are *decomposable* into their component parts: if an electric current is applied to water (a liquid) it separates out into oxygen and hydrogen (which are both gases). Consequentially, the component parts of an assemblage operate in *relations of exteriority*[16]: even when the assemblage comes apart, the component parts continue to exist. For example, the hydrogen atoms of a water molecule persevere even though they may no longer be part of the water molecule. Fourth, every assemblage is engaged in processes of *territorialisation*, *deterritorialisation* or *reterritorialisation*. Territorialisation describes the process through which an entity maintains its identity. That is, water is *territorialising when* it keeps its identity through the continuous interaction of its component parts (i.e. of hydrogen and oxygen). However, water can *deterritorialise* (i.e. it loses its identity) when its component parts come apart. In this case, water disintegrates, again leaving only the two gases of hydrogen and oxygen. Water may, however, *reterritorialise* when hydrogen and oxygen either return to their original identity

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[16] These "relations of exteriority" have to be contrasted with Hegelian "seamless totalities" which operate in "relations of interiority". The component parts of seamless totalities stop existing the moment the totality comes apart. An example, of a seamless totality would be a father and his children: The 'identity of the role of father or of that of son or daughter, cannot exist outside their mutual relation' (DeLanda, 2016:1).

(i.e. when a spark is added to a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen, an explosion results, producing water) or into a different one (e.g. through various intermediate steps, oxygen and hydrogen may also assemble as, for example, Hydrogen Peroxide (H2O2)). In summary, all assemblages are *immanent* and *decomposable*, consist of *component parts* which *interact* in *relations of exteriority* and variously *territorialise*, *deterritorialise* and *reterritorialise*.

6.1.1   The NSS as a Macro Assemblage

This section now asserts that the NSS could be understood as an assemblage. Using Figure 3, as a scaffold, first, the NSS consists of heterogeneous *component parts* which *interact* with one another. Whereas for the water molecule these were oxygen and hydrogen, I suggest that the component parts of the NSS comprise (i) universities, (ii) the Office for Students (OfS), (iii) policy documents, (iv) current students, (v) prospective students, (vi) an online infrastructure (where students fill in the NSS), (vii) newspapers which publish the rankings, and (viii) the UniStats website. Importantly, each of these component parts could be understood as assemblages themselves (i.e. entities in their own right), some of which have pre-existed the NSS and, in all likelihood, will outlive it.

Second – and this is where this discussion connects to this thesis's discussion of governmentality - the NSS attains its governmental (Foucault, 2009) '*emergent properties*' (DeLanda, 2006:56) through artificially enforced specific *interactions* between its *component parts*. More specifically, building on Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, these interactions could be conceived as *mixtures* of disciplinary, neo-liberal (i.e. competitive) and antagonistic modes of interaction whilst one such mode may dominate between certain component parts (Figure 3 displays these modes of interaction in the shape of arrows). For example, disciplinary interactions may be more prominent between "governmental departments and universities" in that the Office for Students (OfS) hierarchically observes whether universities are compliant. If they are

not, the OfS may step-in to punish universities for exerting "inappropriate influence" (e.g. by excluding those universities from rankings (Anyangwe, 2011)). Disciplinary interactions may similarly exist between "students and universities" in that students "normalisingly judge" universities when filling in the NSS questionnaire. Competitive interactions, on the other hand, may dominate "between universities" (e.g., universities compete over student feedback and numbers). That is, universities - in DeLanda's social ontology conceptualised as 'institutional organisations' - 'possess an external identity as enduring, goal-directed entities' (DeLanda, 2006:75) who 'exist as part of populations of other organizations [i.e. other universities] with which they interact' in competitive relations.

In addition, the properties of assemblages are not reducible to the properties of their component parts, but rather exceed these (DeLanda, 2006). For instance, in the NSS, the combination of competition and discipline may result in a more profound internal capacity to govern the academic population than either discipline or competition could achieve individually. In addition, the NSS cannot be reduced to universities, student populations and infrastructures (or even to "individual persons", such as staff members and students). In fact, assemblage theory eschews reductionism. DeLanda (2012), for example argues that people (and larger scale entities) are not just a "cloud of atoms", i.e. a mere collection of individual parts (again the water molecule from above is a perfect example how the properties of the whole (water--fluid--kills fires) *exceed* the sum of its parts (hydrogen and oxygen—gases--incite fires).

Third, every assemblage is *immanent* (and not transcendental) in that if its component parts stopped interacting, the assemblage would also cease to exist (ibid.): the NSS would, for example, cease to exist if students refused to be a part of it (e.g. by boycotting the NSS (Grove, 2016)). This is connected to the fact that every assemblage is also *decomposable* into its component parts: a university (as one component part of the NSS) may continue to exist - at least for a few months - if it decided to boycott the NSS. This university, of course, is likely to

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be punished for this transgression through discipline (e.g. by threatening to close the university) and through the market (e.g. by not attracting students because of its expulsion from league tables). *Fourth*, every assemblage is in a process of *territorialisation* (which translates to an assemblage maintaining its identity), *deterritorialisation* (it loses its identity) or *reterritorialisation* (it regains its previous identity or assumes a new one) (DeLanda, 2006). For example, the NSS territorialises (i.e. it keeps its identity) through maintaining the specific ways in which its component parts interact (i.e. students must continue their rating, universities must continue to react to this, and government authorities must continue their supervision). The NSS may, on the other hand, begin to deterritorialise when its component parts change (or stop) their interactional pattern: again, for example, when students refused to exert their "normalising judgement" through a national NSS boycott in 2016, this almost destroyed (*deterritorialised*) the NSS (Grove, 2016). This boycott eventually, however, proved as too weak to effect a national change. Consequentially, the NSS *reterritorialised* almost entirely to its original identity.
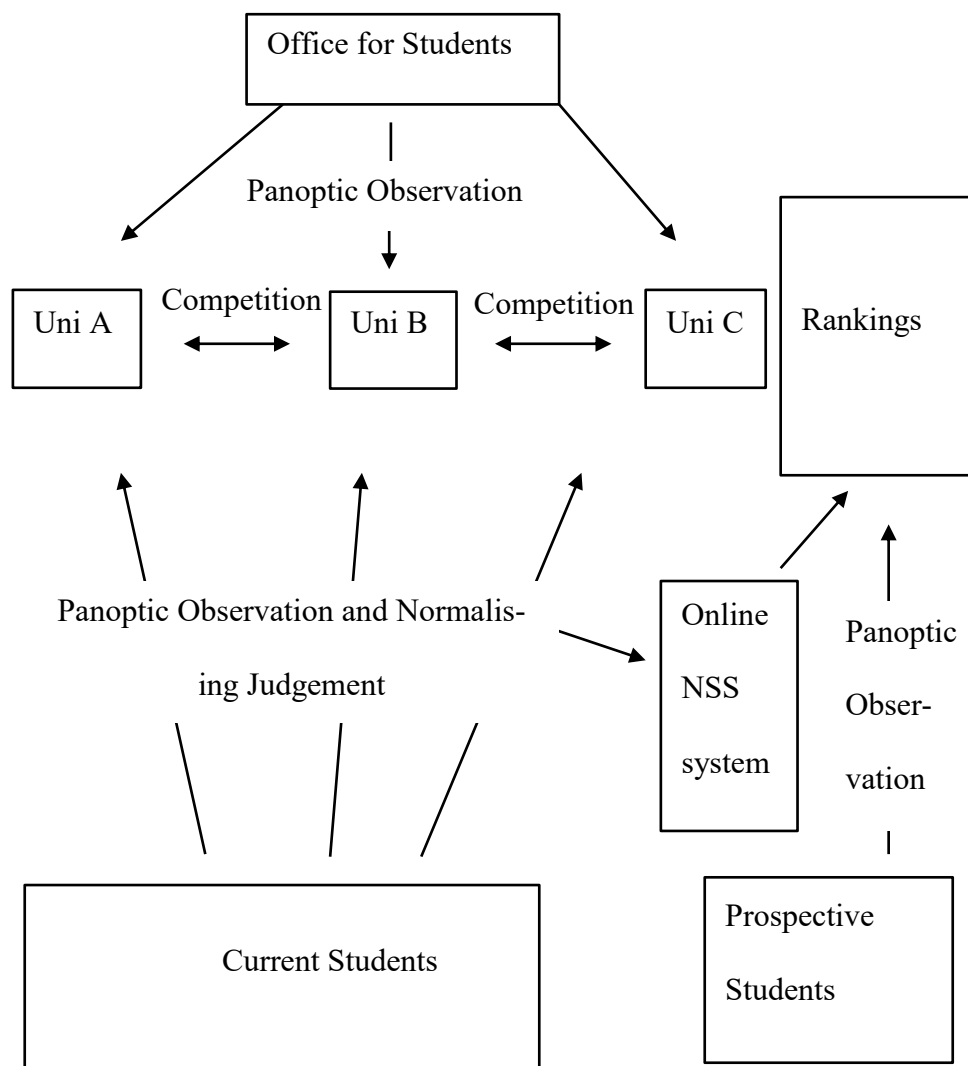
Figure 3: The NSS as a macro assemblage and its component parts.

6.1.2 Universities as Meso Assemblages

This now opens the opportunity to outline what I consider the biggest strength of assemblage theory: that "relata" can be significantly affected by their relations whilst still being figured as entities in their own right. First, it is important to consider that *assemblages can exist at varying levels of scale* whilst *one assemblage may be a component part of another assemblage.* For example, a water molecule may be part of a larger assemblage (e.g. the capillaries of a tree); similarly, a university (as an assemblage in its own right) is part of the NSS. In

both cases, those former assemblages exist in a 'part-to-whole' (DeLanda, 2006:34) relationship to the latter. Crucially, whilst an assemblage 'emerges from the interaction among its parts, *once it comes into existence it can affect those parts*' (p. 34; emphasis added). This is fundamental for the present analysis in that the NSS (as one macro assemblage) has an effect on its component parts, such as universities (as already argued in Chapters 4 and 5). That is, universities do not only compete with other universities (because of the NSS), but also reconfigure *internally*.

How do universities (as assemblages themselves) reconfigure internally? This question can only be answered if, firstly, I clarify what those various component parts of universities may comprise. To begin with, at my institution, these component parts are "faculties" (in my case, the "Faculty of Education"). Faculties comprise further assemblages, such as schools. Schools comprise courses, courses comprise year groups, year groups comprise units and units comprise lecturers and students. Each are assemblages in their own right and are part of what DeLanda calls a hierarchical authority structure with the vice-chancellor overseeing deans (of "faculties"), who oversee heads of schools who oversee course leaders. These, in return, oversee year group leaders, who oversee module leaders who oversee lecturers who "oversee" the coordination of their own bodies and their component parts (e.g. their activities, the coordination of extremities, thought processes etc.). Importantly, some of these assemblages can be parts of other assemblages. For instance, I (as one assemblage) may teach on (i.e. belong to) the larger-scale assemblage "Teaching Studies" (a specific unit) on Mondays, whilst belonging to the assemblage "English Pedagogy" (another unit) on a Tuesday. I currently am also in charge of the assemblage "Teaching Studies 3" (I am the unit leader). In addition, I am part of the department for "Primary Teacher Education" (which is part of the school for Teacher Education); however, I am also part of a different school "Early Years and Childhood Studies" in that I teach on a Masters course. In short, I (as an assemblage) can be "plugged into" other assemblages of varying scale.

Alongside my university's academic components (including its associated hierarchies), there are those component parts which deal with administrative and maintenance activities (such as IT, cleaning, catering etc.). In addition, universities also comprise "material" component parts, such as campus buildings, offices, classrooms, chairs, projectors, or IT systems.

6.1.3 Internal Surveys as Component Parts of Universities

Returning to the NSS, the NSS measures (i.e. normalisingly judges) only universities and courses. It was asserted in Chapter 4 that university leaders now increasingly observe individual course satisfaction and exert pressures on course leaders (as further component parts of universities) to raise their student feedback. Lisa remarks:

> "We had another meeting where [the course leader] reported on a meeting with senior leadership of the university. They [senior leadership] apparently again suggested that the course might be shut down if we don't improve the NSS ratings for our course." (Excerpt 47. Lisa's research diary)

Due to the NSS, many universities have now reconfigured *internally* by implementing intra-institutional feedback systems, such as Internal Surveys (Canning, 2017a). At my university, these are called Internal Student Surveys (ISS) whereas at Lisa's university I described these simply as Internal Surveys. Using Figure 4 as a scaffold, these surveys, of course, could be understood as assemblages themselves. That is, these "Internal Survey Assemblages" comprise as their respective component parts (i) university senior managers, (ii) course leaders, (iii) students, and (iv) modules who then interact in specific ways. Just like the (macro) NSS enacts competitive (between universities) and disciplinary relations (between students and universities), these meso relations are competitive between some component parts (e.g. modules compete with other modules over student feedback) and disciplinary between others (students exert their panoptic gazes and "normalisingly judge" modules whilst managers instrumentalise this process).
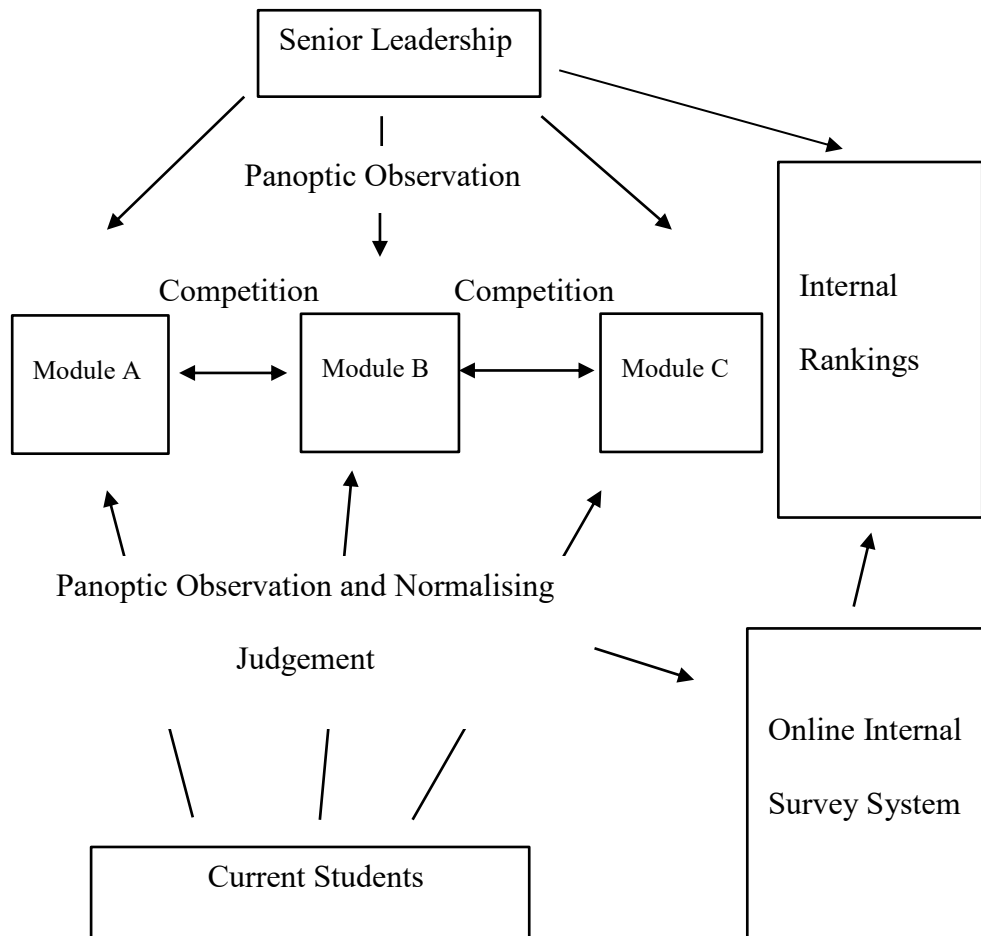
Figure 4: Intra-institutional Feedback systems as meso assemblages

6.1.4 Micro Assemblages

This analysis can now be continued in the same fashion towards lower levels of scale. That is, Internal Surveys, in return, affect the internal composition of its respective component assemblages. For instance, one such assemblage – a "module" (see Figure 5) (or a "unit" in my case) - comprises module leaders, students, and individual lecturers as their component assemblages. For example, due to negative ratings in internal surveys, the module leader in Lisa's excerpt on page 80 became "agitated" and hence established different (disciplinary) relations of exteriority towards those "lecturers who he thought would be responsible for this negative student feedback". By being ranked on a

scale (see excerpt on page 78), lecturers may now enter into competitive relations of exteriority with other lecturers by competing over student feedback. These reconfigured relations of exteriority between the module's component parts resulted in a changed *identity* of the module. That is, through Internal Surveys, this specific module "deterritorialised" and simultaneously "reterritorialised" into something different (i.e. a more competitive module with specific internal disciplinary and competitive characteristics). This reterritorialisation again affected the module's component parts. For example, as will be argued in section 6.2.2, university lecturers may become increasingly anxious due to the pressures of student feedback. Apart from disciplinary (between module leaders and lecturers) and competitive relations (between lecturers), we now have a third "mode of interaction": that of antagonistic relations. It could be suggested that, precisely because lecturers feel disciplined, they may now develop antagonistic relations towards their students.
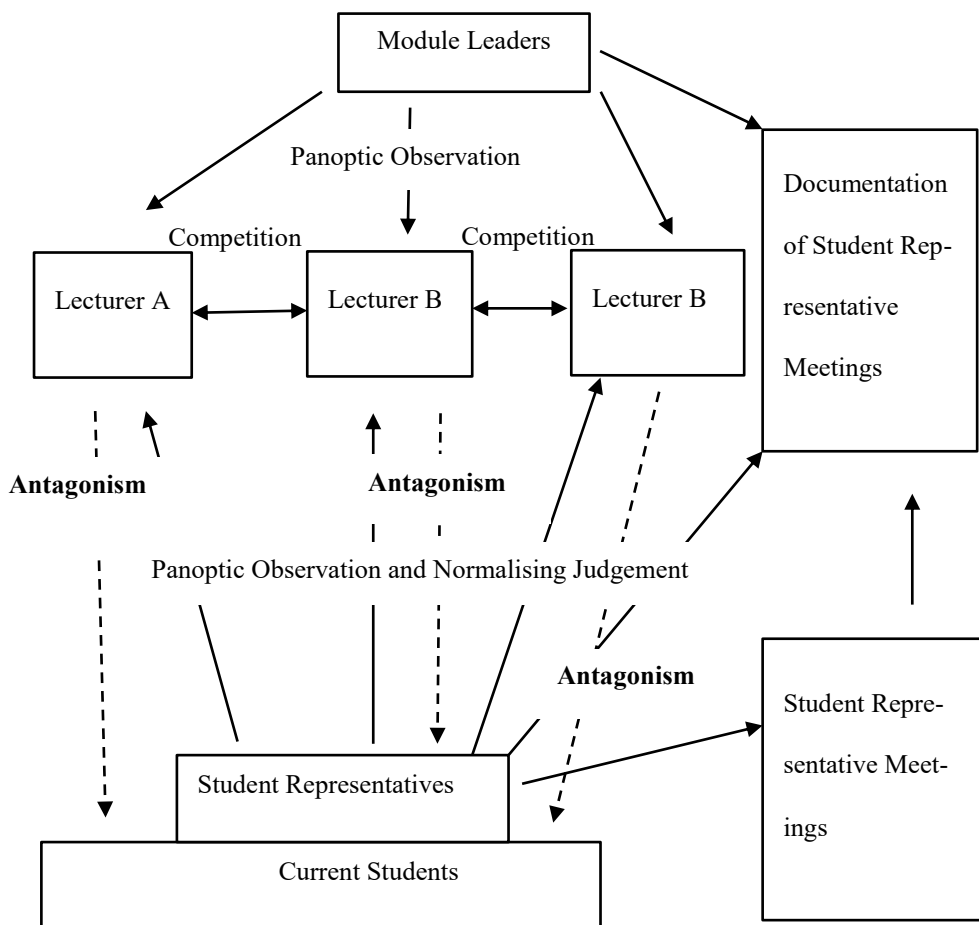
Figure 5: Student Representative Meetings (SRMs) as assemblages

To single out "culprits" of negative student feedback, the module leader may also make use of further temporary assemblages, such as a Student Representative Meeting (SRM) (see page 78). SRMs can offer additional "intel" on which lecturers should be individualised and made responsible for the negative student feedback. It could, therefore, be suggested that through the combined pressure of the NSS and Internal Surveys, these Student Representative Meetings (SRMs) assume a different quality. I wrote in my research journal:

> "I sat in another [student representative meeting] and really had the feeling that my knowledge of how student voice is utilised has an impact on how I conducted myself in this meeting. I was really nervous that students might single either my unit or even my own teaching out as being problematic. This made me feel quite weak and disempowered. I remember that my heart was beating fast when different representatives were giving their feedback about specific units. When students then finally made some "suggestions for improvement" for my unit, I

> *passively thanked them for their suggestions and obediently said that I*
> *will try to put these into practice. This was despite the fact that these*
> *suggestions could not be put into practice [for reasons which I cannot*
> *discuss]." (Excerpt 48.* My research journal)

Due to the NSS, Internal Surveys and Student Representative Meetings (SRMs), further 'ephemeral assemblages' (i.e. assemblages with short life spans) may reconfigure (i.e. deterritorialise and reterritorialise differently) (DeLanda, 2006:54). These comprise 'social encounters' or, more specifically, 'conversations between two or more persons' (p. 54). For instance, revisiting the excerpt on page 63, in which I told off a student for distracting behaviour, I

> *"started worrying, however, whether he might now give me negative*
> *student feedback in the future and that, as a result, my contract as an*
> *associate lecturer would not be renewed." (My research diary)*

Interestingly, I wrote later that

> *"I realised that in the following sessions I was trying to be particularly*
> *nice to the student." (Excerpt 49. My research diary)*

This reconfigured behaviour towards the student may be a direct result of the pressures generated by the NSS, Internal Surveys and Student Representative Meetings (SRMs). In short, if there had not been an NSS and resultant university internal pressures, I may not have found it necessary to be "particularly nice to the student" in the following sessions.

In summary, the NSS has the power to reconfigure (i.e. to deterritorialise and reterritorialise) a range of smaller scale assemblages (such as universities, courses, modules, lecturers and students). That is, the NSS reconfigures universities and courses and - through a hierarchical "trickle-down effect" – Internal Surveys are implemented and modules, Student Representative Meetings (SRMs), lecturers and conversations become reconfigured. As a result, interactions at varying levels of scale become competitised (Foucault, 2008), disciplinary (Foucault, 1977) and antagonistic (Laclau, 2005): universities compete against universities, courses against courses, modules against modules and lecturers against lecturers. This happens on ranked scales

accompanied by perpetual surveillance (Foucault, 1977) and increasing antagonisms (Laclau, 2005) of lecturers towards students.

To reiterate, I maintain that assemblage theory's strength lies in its following characteristics. First, assemblage theory opens the possibility to figure the NSS, universities, courses, Internal Surveys, modules, and lecturers as entities in their own right. At each level of scale, these entities assume a specific identity. This assemblage theory view of "levels of scale" provides insights into how 'macro' and 'micro' levels (DeLanda, 2006, p. 11) stand in a 'part-to-whole' (p. 30) relationship with one another whilst these parts influence the whole and the whole influences these parts. Second, DeLanda's theory clarifies how discipline may dominate between some component parts (e.g. between module leaders and the lecturers on the modules) whilst competitive logics may be more prominent between others (e.g. between individual lecturers). Antagonistic relations may, on the other hand, exist in a uni-directional mode (e.g. lecturers develop antagonisms *towards* students). Still, their combination (i.e. a "neo-liberal-disciplinary-antagonism") produces emergent properties which are not reducible to the properties 'of its parts' (p. 11). Precisely this combination may make it possible for the NSS to "govern" its "subjects" more effectively than discipline, neo-liberalism or antagonism would be able to in isolation.

The following section now shifts the focus away from DeLanda's work to theorise the NSS through an alternative realist theoretical framework: Karen Barad's "agential realism" (Barad, 2007). This framework is particularly apt to theorise another NSS associated phenomenon: how boundaries are created between lecturers and students. In addition, I argue that agential realism is superior to DeLanda's framework in analysing what Barad calls topological relationships (such as that one university may "connect" with another university by traversing state boundaries).

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6.2 The NSS as an Apparatus: an Agential Realist Contribution

Plagiarism note: Parts of this section are published in the journal "Discourse" (Thiel, 2018).

As with DeLanda's work above, Barad's agential realism gains its analytical strength from its ability to analyse macro and micro levels of scale together. In comparison to DeLanda, there are, however, also significant differences between the two authors' works, most prominently embodied in their concepts of intra-action (Barad, 2007) and interaction (DeLanda, 2006) and their conceptualisation of knowledge and matter (these will be tackled in section 6.3). In the following, I argue that Barad's framework is superior to DeLanda's in one central aspect, namely how boundaries (for example, between lecturers and students) could be understood. More specifically, Barad makes it possible to show how all boundaries (in the universe) are indissociably entangled with identity formations.

Whilst Barad started her academic career as a theoretical quantum-physicist with publications solely in this area (Barad and Chou, 1978; Barad, 1984, Barad et al., 1984, 1986) her project of combining quantum-physics with the critical social sciences began with her seminal article about posthumanist performativity (Barad, 2003). This article was subsequently fleshed out into her magnum opus "Meeting the Universe Halfway" (Barad, 2007). Since then Barad has published on a range of topics, such as Derrida (Barad, 2010), natural quantum phenomena (Barad, 2011b), the philosophy of science studies (Barad, 2011a), "touch" (Barad, 2012), diffraction (Barad, 2014), queer theory (Barad, 2015) and the unity of space, time, and matter (Barad, 2017).

Importantly, Barad's work has gained vast academic popularity in recent years[17] with a steady incline in the use of her work from its earliest utilisations (Adams, 2004; Birke et al., 2004; Rosengarten, 2004)

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[17] A scopus search with the search algorithm (TITLE-ABS-KEY(Barad) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY(Karen Barad)OR TITLE-ABS-KEY(Agential Realism)) on 2/11/17 yielded 317 results whilst 1715 documents cited her work in total.

to its use in a multitude of academic fields. For instance, whilst the social sciences have taken up her work with most fervour (e.g. Aradau, 2010; Hultman and Taguchi, 2010; Leonardi, 2013), other academic fields have also utilised her work, such as computer sciences (Prophet and Pritchard, 2015; Warfield, 2016); business studies (O'Regan, 2012; Niemimaa, 2016); psychology (Johnson, 2008; Xenakis and Arnellos, 2017); or planetary sciences (Thomson and Engelmann, 2017). In the field of education, work has been published in the areas of gender problematics (e.g. Juelskjaer, 2013; Lenz Taguchi and Palmer, 2013; Taylor, 2013); educational philosophy (Edwards and Fenwick, 2015; Gough and Gough, 2017; Mazzei and Jackson, 2017); early childhood studies (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012; Land, 2015); and mathematics education (de Freitas and Sinclair, 2013). Yet again, no studies have explored the National Student Survey through Barad's lens.

Since Barad's agential realism is difficult to grasp, I first provide an introduction to her framework. This is then followed by theorising encounters with students through Barad's concept of the "apparatus" in which boundary creation and isolation work alongside ongoing and iterative (i.e. repetitive) practices. After, the chapter points to a renewed understanding of the notions of solidarity as "shared agency".

6.2.1 Introduction to Agential Realism

'Agential realism is an epistemological and ontological framework that cuts across many of the well-worn oppositions that circulate in traditional realism versus constructivism, agency versus structure, idealism versus materialism, and poststructuralism versus Marxism debates.' (Barad, 2007:225)

'Apparatuses are boundary making practices.' (p. 148)

Barad's (2007) framework of agential realism is novel in that it reads Niels Bohr's quantum-physical insights (i.e. his "philosophy physics") through Foucault's notion of "discursive practices" and Butler's concept of "performativity". This "diffractive" reading" culminates

in her theoretical framework of *agential realism*. As the name suggests, agential realism follows a realist ontology whilst eschewing representationalist understandings of realism (in the sense of an independent world outside that is then somehow represented by ideas inside human minds). According to Barad, humans are not simply *in* this world whilst gazing passively at the events around them. Rather, they are *part of* this world - and to gaze at the world 'one must actively intervene' (p. 97). Similarly, Barad rejects Newtonian physics in which independent objects move through space and forwards in time; instead, space, time and matter are fundamentally interconnected in that they emerge simultaneously in the shape of 'spacetimemattering' (p. 234). The following section will now first outline some of the quantum-theoretical assumptions of agential realism.

a)   Niels Bohr's Philosophy Physics

Quantum-Physicists Niels Bohr and his colleague Werner Heisenberg had a long-standing theoretical argument about the nature of particles (Barad, 2007). This debate concerned the question why it was not possible to simultaneously determine the *momentum* and the *position* of electrons. Heisenberg's explanation is commonly referred to as the Heisenberg "Uncertainty Principle". It dictates that it is impossible to *know* the exact *momentum* and the *location* of an electron because of the disturbance created by measurements (i.e. measurement interference). Heisenberg assumed that both momentum and position of the particle still existed, but we simply cannot *know* them. Hence, his explanation is *epistemological*.

Bohr, on the other hand, postulated an *ontological* explanation. He argued that it could simply not *be* that momentum and location of the electron were to be measured simultaneously (Barad, 2007). This was not because of some measurement interference (as postulated by Heisenberg) but because "location" and "momentum" are mutually exclusive phenomena, both contingent on a very specific experimental *ap-*

paratus. For example, "momentum" or "location" are not some independently existing variables, but are *brought into existence* through the exact experimental 'material arrangement', i.e. the type of measuring device in relation to the electron (p. 139). Certain apparatuses produce the phenomenon of "momentum" (while excluding the phenomenon of position) whilst other experimental arrangements produce the phenomenon of "position" (while excluding the possibility for the production of the phenomenon of momentum). In asserting the impact of the *apparatus* on the object studied, Bohr rejected Newtonian physics. In short, there are no 'independent objects with independently determinate boundaries and properties' (p. 33). Instead, *phenomena* are 'the primary ontological unit' (p. 33). More specifically, phenomena are 'the observations obtained under [a specific] … experimental arrangement' (Bohr 1963, cited in Barad, 2007:119).

This process is what Barad refers to as "*intra-action*": instead of an independent electron "interacting" with the measuring device, both electron and measuring device come into existence through their engagement. That is, 'relata do not preexist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions' (p. 140). Scientists cannot passively gaze at an electron's inherent values because there simply is no such thing. Rather the value in question (e.g. momentum or position) is brought into existence through the specific configuration of the apparatus. This exact configuration then creates a temporary boundary: the agential cut.

This agential cut is crucial since it determines which part of the phenomenon is about to become either "subject" or "object". Bohr for example preferred the notion of "agencies of observation" instead of "subject" because this more effectively captures how the "agencies of observation" (subject) affect how the *object of observation"* (object) materialises. Without the particular arrangement of the apparatus, the agential cut does not exist and, hence, there are no subject and object. This results in a reconceptualisation of objectivity: Barad argues that

"objectivity" exists (it is all around us), not as an absolute exterior condition, but as the product of intra-acting agencies (which we, as humans, are part of).
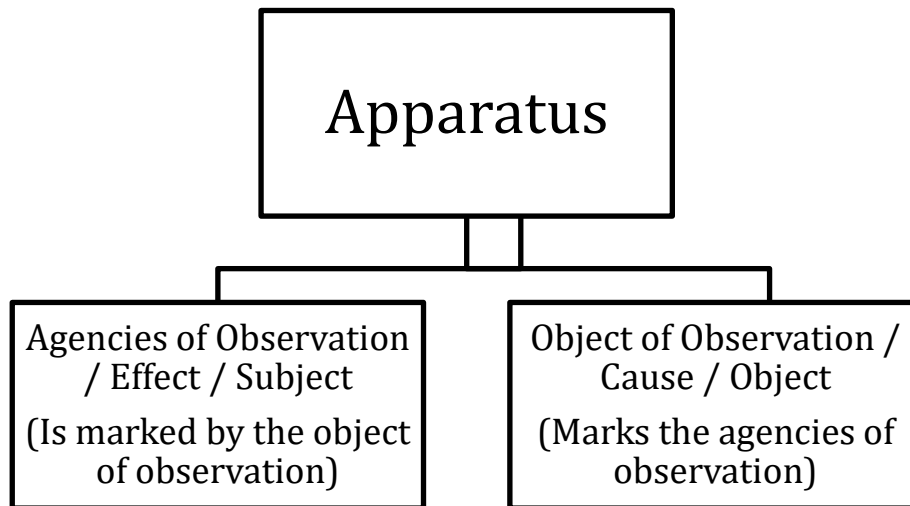
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Figure 6: Simplification of the apparatus

As will be argued in 6.2.2, in the context of the NSS I conceptualise this as follows: Lecturers, students, or feedback systems do not pre-exist their encounter since, as Barad (2007) highlights, there are no inherent boundaries in the world. Rather lecturers, students and feedback systems (ontologically) emerge through these encounters. Put differently, they emerge as part of their intra-action because no entities in this universe exist independently, but *always* materialise through their intra-action. The specific intra-actions between students and lecturers then also necessarily create the boundaries between what becomes a "lecturer", a "student" or a "feedback system" (because without boundaries there would be no such entities).

At this stage, I have to confess that whilst I believe this to be a coherent application of Barad's work, I cannot help but experience a difficulty in accepting the proposition of intra-action. That is, I find the idea of intra-action rather unsettling. For example, intra-action would dictate that whilst I am typing these words, I *emerge* in a specific way

whilst *I did not pre-exist my encounter with the computer as a determinately bounded body*. Nevertheless, despite its counter-intuitive content, Barad argues that intra-action has been confirmed by experimental designs. For example, since Heisenberg's and Bohr's initial purely theoretical debates, the so-called Micro-Maser (MM) experiments demonstrated that the apparatus really *does* "co-produce" the phenomenon observed (in this case whether an atom *becomes a* wave or a particle) whilst *not* measuring an observation-independent reality. Importantly, these MM experiments make it possible to assert that no measurement interference has occurred, thereby disproving Heisenberg's rationale.

In these MM experiments, gold atoms are fired at a so-called grating, which is a plate with two slits. The atoms then pass through the slits and make a little mark on a detector screen. The crux of the experiment is this. If the atoms are simply fired at the grating, they behave like a wave (and not like particles). If a special (photographic) device, however, determines which of the two slits the atoms travelled through (which it can do without disturbing the atoms[18]), the atoms become particles. In other words, the sheer event of determining which slit gold atoms travelled through, makes these atoms *materialise* as particles. In the absence of this measurement, gold atoms *become* waves. More counterintuitively, this particle-like behaviour occurs regardless of whether a researcher *actually* decides to look at "which slit" the gold atoms went through. It is simply enough for there to be the *possibility of knowing* this "which slit information". (This is why Barad argues for an onto-epistemology in which being and knowing are entangled.)

Even more astoundingly, another variation of the MM experiment makes it possible to erase the information which slit the atom travelled

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[18] This is made possible by first exciting the atoms, then sending them through another device in which they lose their excited state which makes them discharge a photon (i.e. a light particle). This photon then makes it possible to determine which slit the atoms travelled through without "disturbing" the trajectory of the atoms themselves.

through *after* the atom has already made a mark on the screen! (That is the "possibility of knowing" can be erased after the atom already travelled through the slit and made its mark.) The results are as follows: those atoms which had their "which slit" information erased suddenly behave[d] like waves. I used the grammatically ambiguous wording "behave[d]" intentionally because it becomes unclear exactly "when" this change of behaviour occurred. That is, in a traditional Newtonian world-view (where matter, time and space are separate entities), an event that has already happened would be reconfigured from the future! However, Barad maintains that whilst this behaviour is, indeed, paradoxical from a Newtonian perspective, it makes sense from a quantum physical world-view which dictates that matter, time and space are always entangled and have no separate existence (as Newton previously thought). Importantly, this dissolving of the "chronology of time" – as recently neatly summarised by de Freitas (2017) - also occurs in realms beyond the microscopic quantum physical. For example, Barad argues that lightning already "knows" where it will have travelled before the lightning actually travels and certain receptor cells in the eyes of stingrays activate before light actually reaches these receptor cells (Barad, 2011b).

Before moving on to the poststructuralist underpinnings of agential realism, I attempt to utilise these experimental insights for this thesis's analysis of the NSS. Due to their counterintuitive nature, I only dare to formulate these as questions. Question 1: Is the sheer possibility of knowing NSS results perhaps enough for the NSS to have an effect on university lecturers? Question 2: Does this perhaps also extend Foucault's assertion of the impact of the Panopticon? In other words, whilst Foucault asserted that the sheer possibility of "being observed" affects the behaviour of inmates, Barad's discussion of the MM experiment perhaps suggests that the sheer material possibility of knowing inmates' behaviour affects inmates' behaviour regardless of whether they are aware of the existence of the Panopticon.

b) Foucault's discursive practices and Butler's performativity

Agential realism is not only underpinned by quantum-theoretical insights, but also by Michel Foucault's work on *discursive practices* and Judith Butler's notion of *performativity.* Starting with the former, Barad (2007:62) asserts that Foucault rejected both structuralist and phenomenological theories. That is, there are no 'external structures' (p. 62) which entirely determine the subject (i.e. structuralism); on the other hand, there also is no 'unified subject' (p. 63) that acts intentionally and rationally at all times (humanism). Instead, the historical context produces particular subjectivities over time (p. 62). That is, power does not act on 'a preexisting subject' as 'an external force', but as 'an immanent set of force relations that constitutes (but does not fully determine) the subject' (p. 63). Moreover, Barad interprets Foucault's work in that 'discursive practices' and the human body in its physical form are intricately linked (p. 63). Importantly, discourse[19] is not 'a synonym for language' (p. 146), but rather discursive practices 'define what counts as meaningful statements' (p. 63). In this sense, discursive practices do not "describe" but "produce" social reality.

Similarly, *regulatory practices* produce 'specific materialization[s] of bodies' (p. 63). According to Barad, this is utilised by Judith Butler (1993) in her concept of "gender performativity" (Barad, 2007). Performativity – importantly not to be confused with 'theatrical performance[s]' (p. 62) – asserts that human bodies are devoid of a preexisting sex. Instead, the repeated (i.e. iterative) practice of "performing" gender produces "sexed" bodies. Put differently, there are no preexisting sexes which are then gendered; rather sexes emerge 'within … gender relations themselves' whilst neither preceding nor following '…the process of gendering…' (Butler 1997, cited in Barad, 2007:62).

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[19] Barad generally uses discourse and discursive practice interchangeably which can be seen by the following transition from one sentence to the next: *'Discourse* is not what is said; it is that which contains and enables what can be said. *Discursive practices* define what counts as meaningful statements'. (Barad, 2007: 146; italics mine)

This concept of gender performativity can be extended to "identity" more generally. In this sense, a person's "identity" is not 'an essence but as a doing': identity is a 'kind of becoming or activity . . . an incessant and repeated action of some sort' (Butler 1990, cited in Barad, 2007).

Relating these insights to this thesis's exploration of higher education, it could be suggested that "performativity" is at play in that lecturers assume their specific identities through repeatedly performing them. That is to say, identity is the result of a repeated (i.e. an iterative) process rather than any form of "essence". Importantly, this iterative performance is unlike a theatrical purposeful performance (which would be much more reminiscent of a "humanist" take on identity), but has more pernicious qualities in that lecturers cannot fully choose the specific identity they learn to perform. For example, as argued in the preceding chapters, I, as a lecturer, neither choose to be judged by my students nor do I necessarily actively wish to be compared to other lecturers. Nevertheless, I simply *am* judged and compared because student feedback systems prescribe that I am. In other words, just as "boys" or "girls" do not actively choose to be gendered into "male" or "female" bodies, lecturers do not choose to be "normalisingly judged", "hierarchically observed", "competitised" and "antagonised". On the other hand, lecturers are not subjected to the structural pressures of the NSS in an entirely passive manner either: instead of the NSS acting on university lecturers 'preexisting subject[s]' as 'an external force', the NSS could rather be understood as 'an immanent set of force relations that constitutes (but does not fully determine) the subject' (p. 63). In short, there may be some form of agency in this process. That is, an "iterative becoming" as part of feedback systems makes lecturers' (docile yet competitive) identities emerge, but there always is the possibility of "becoming differently".

c) Agential Realism

On these pillars of quantum theory and critical social sciences, Barad develops her fully-fledged framework of "agential realism" (Barad, 2007). I would now like to summarise (and further elaborate on) four central interconnected notions which I deem to be particularly important for agential realism: *apparatus, agency*, *intra-action* and *iterativity*. As outlined in section 6.2.1, Barad's (2007) notion of the *apparatus* is inspired by Niels Bohr's theorisation of the influence of the experimental setup in quantum physical experiments on the phenomena produced. As already implied, these apparatuses consist of "*agencies*" that, importantly, do not pre-exist their encounter but rather emerge through (and as part of) what Barad calls *intra-action,* in lieu of the more common notion of interaction. Whilst *interaction* implies that certain determinately bounded individual agencies existed before their interaction, "intra-action" is better equipped to describe the emergent character of those agencies. Moreover, counter to received wisdoms about quantum physics, Barad suggests that intra-action is *not restricted to quantum physical experiments and the microscopic realm*. Rather, quantum theory *'supersedes Newtonian physics'* (p. 324; emphasis added): humans as 'determinately bounded and propertied human subjects do not exist prior to their "involvement" in naturalcultural practices' (p. 171). In short, agential realism asserts that all matter in the universe, including those human matters described as "social", are the result of intra-action.

Importantly, there are three entangled aspects to each intra-action: **(i)** materialisations (of agencies and objects of observations), **(ii)** the agential cut and **(iii)** exclusions (Barad, 2007). These aspects are fundamentally contingent on one another in that materialisations cannot exist without agential cuts and exclusions. First, matter can only emerge (or materialise) through the *agential cut*. This agential cut "splits" – or cuts 'together and apart' (p. 389) – the apparatus into the 'agencies of observation' (or *effect*) and the 'object of observation' (or

cause). In other words, the agential cut makes the agencies of observation and the object of observation *materialise* or *"matter"* (see Figure 6 on page 169. It is of crucial importance that Barad uses the verb "to matter" in a sense that it simultaneously denotes that something (a) materialises (in the sense of taking shape) and (b) that something is of significance (i.e. in the sense of "this really matters to me"). This relates to one of Barad's central assertions, namely that matter and meaning are indissociably entangled (just like in the micro-maser experiment as described in section 6.2.1 a). Importantly, this entanglement is not to be understood as simply intertwinement, but as quantum-entanglement, i.e. to 'lack an independent, self-contained existence' (p. iv).

What matters (i.e. what emerges as *effect* or as *cause*) is fundamentally contingent on the specific material arrangement of the apparatus (Barad, 2007). A small change to the experimental conditions in a quantum-physical experiment enacts a different agential cut and, simultaneously, different agencies and objects of observation. The same logic applies to all other apparatuses (including those that are commonly described as "social"). Moreover, in addition to the agential cut coinciding with certain materialisations, Barad suggests that the (emerging) object (i.e. the cause) always leaves *marks* on the (emerging) agencies of observation (i.e. effect). In other words, the agencies of observation are marked by the object (of observation). Third, intra-action always excludes certain things 'from mattering' (p. 181). That is, utilising Bohr's principle of complementarity and indeterminacy, one particular apparatus produces one phenomenon while another produces a different one. Both phenomena are mutually exclusive or complementary. Crucially, a phenomenon - including its delineating boundaries between agencies of observation and object of observation - remains indeterminate - *it is excluded from mattering* - 'in the absence of a specific physical arrangement of the apparatus' (p. 114). As will be argued in the following section, lecturers (as part of the NSS) assume a certain identity (a mattering) which is contingent on their intra-actions with students. This also goes alongside the exclusions of other

potential ways of "becoming a lecturer" and "becoming a student" (such as lecturer identities which are not based on the fear of being rated poorly).

Barad now utilises the notion of iterativity and develops it as follows. Firstly, intra-actions (and their associated agential cuts, materialisations and exclusions) may be understood as "becomings" instead of "beings". Barad (2007) achieves this conceptual shift by amalgamating Foucault's notion of discursive practices and Bohr's notion of the apparatus into her neologism of *material-discursive practices* (which she progressively uses as a synonym[20] for *"apparatus"*).

Secondly, Barad (2007) builds on Butler's concept of performativity and identity formation, suggesting that for boundaries and materialising effects to emerge more permanently, intra-action (and the associated agential cuts) need to become *iterative*. It is this iterative intra-action (i.e. intra-action in a recurring fashion) which produces the illusion of a 'bodily boundary' (p. 155). Boundaries could therefore be understood as repeated agential cuts. Hence, instead of entities existing in a state of static independent *being*, they are in a constant process of a repeated (i.e. iterative) *becoming.* As will be argued later, this iterative performativity is not restricted to human bodies, but rather can be extended to all phenomena in the universe. To exemplify this, both a chair and the floor on which it sits could be understood as iteratively materialising by intra-acting with one another. This makes it possible to understand the NSS as an iterative materialisation in its own right (quite similar to DeLanda's assemblage take on macro objects as presented in section 6.1).

Agential realism's novelty lies in the fact that it goes beyond some poststructuralist conceptions, especially those that understood "ontology" as mainly the effect of language (e.g. Lyotard, 1984). Barad as-

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[20] Further synonyms which Barad uses for apparatus are phenomenon and structure.

serts that 'matter matters' (Barad, 2007:210). Similarly, Barad's framework also goes beyond Butler's (1993) poststructuralist feminist understanding of discourse which, as Barad (2007:152) argues, only tackles how discourse has an effect on the human body - i.e. it describes how discourse matters – whilst avoiding to show how 'matter comes to matter'. In Barad's framework, matter is, importantly, not restricted to the realm of the "*natural"* but also comprises phenomena that are classed as *cultural*. In fact, a large proportion of Barad's project centres on the attempt to deconstruct the demarcating lines between nature and culture. This move is captured in her notion of *naturalcultural* practices, suggesting that all matter in the universe is the result of intra-actions (and this includes those matters conventionally described as human or social).

6.2.2 The NSS as an Intra-active Apparatus

The following section now utilises Barad's (2007:ix) concept of the apparatus to analyse the 'entanglements' that exist between student-lecturer encounters, Internal Surveys and the NSS. More specifically, the formation of specific lecturer identities (figured as "materialisations" or "matterings") will be theorised together with the emergence of iterative boundaries between staff and students within student feedback systems. As a starting point, encounters with students are theorised whilst later sections will then relate these encounters to the workings of the NSS.

a) Intra-actions with students

Building on Barad's three dimensions of intra-action mentioned earlier, it is possible to ask the following question: Which **(i)** *materialisations* (of agencies and objects of observation) were enacted by **(ii)** which *agential cuts* and **(iii)** what was simultaneously *excluded* (from mattering)? To explore these three entangled aspects of intra-action, I begin by revisiting the academic diary excerpt that depicted a confrontation

with a student (see page 63 and page 163) in which, after reprimand-ing a student for distracting behaviour, I

> *"started worrying, however, whether he might now give me negative student feedback in the future and that, as a result, my contract as an associate lecturer would not be renewed." (My research diary)*

Again, I wrote later that

> *"I realised that in the following sessions I was trying to be particularly nice to the student." (My research diary)*

Focussing on the precise moment of my "telling off", it could be sug-gested that this moment cannot only *be understood as*, but actually *was* an apparatus which emerged through intra-action. As part of this intra-action, **(i)** the student and I materialised. More specifically, **(ii)** an agential cut (which is inherent in every intra-action) split the apparatus into the 'object of observation' - i.e. the student - and the 'agencies of observation', i.e. myself (p. 154). That is, since 'determinately bounded and propertied human subjects do not exist prior to their "involvement" in naturalcultural practices' (p. 171), the student and I did not pre-exist our encounter. Rather what we became in that moment - i.e. the short-lived "identity" that we assumed - was the result of our intra-action. Moreover, since I addressed the student during my "telling-off", it could be suggested that for that brief moment, I emerged as the 'object of observation' whilst the student emerged as the 'agencies of observa-tion' (p. 114). Importantly, the agential cut functioned as a temporary *boundary* separating the student from myself, i.e. as a short-lived cut-ting 'together and apart' (p. 389). This 'causal intra-action' (p. 140) re-sulted in the (iterative) materialisation of a more compliant student for the rest of the session under **(iii)** the exclusion of other materialisations of behaviour (e.g. distracting behaviour).

b)   Feedback anxiety

This section will now apply Barad's notion of *iterativity* to the workings of student feedback systems by considering the events that unfolded

after the confrontation between the student and myself, i.e. the fact that "I started worrying" about whether the student might now give me negative feedback in one of the Internal Surveys or student meetings. Whilst worrying could be conceptualised under the umbrella term of "affect" (Yao and Grady, 2005; Sabri, 2013), I feared that this, in return, might result in ramifications for my then temporary employment situation. Could "worrying", therefore, be understood as a process of 'iterative becoming' (p. 151)? Worrying, indeed, has an aura of repetition. Some psychological studies, for example, frame worrying within the field of *repetitive* negative thinking (e.g. McEvoy et al., 2010).

Worrying - as what DeLanda (2006:156) would class a subpersonal process standing in a part to whole relationship to the assemblage "human" - must, however, not be understood as being sealed off from the "outside" world. Rather, an agential realist understanding would figure worrying as being entangled with processes that are typically understood to lie outside the human body, such as encounters with students within feedback systems. In other words, worrying, could be understood as a subpersonal material(discursive) apparatus which intra-acted with apparatuses that would traditionally be described as "social", thereby traversing 'bodily boundaries' (Barad, 2007:156). For example, returning to the data excerpt above, the process of worrying was not only what started to iteratively "matter" as a result of my encounter with the student, but also had materialising effects on my teaching in the following sessions in that I was trying to be particularly "nice" to the student. In other words, worrying about negative student feedback **(i)** contributed to my own materialisation as a "nice", more compliant subject (i.e. "agencies of observation" in Barad's terminology) whilst the student materialised in a more powerful position (i.e. as the "object of observation"). As part of this intra-action **(ii)** an *iterative* agential cut manifested itself in a boundary between myself and (the) student(s) which **(iii)** excluded a range of other materialisations. These, importantly, were indeterminate in this particular intra-action since they did not "matter" (in Barad's double sense of the word). One

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possible exclusion from mattering could have, for example, comprised a stricter expectation of respectful student behaviour.

Re-examining the research diary excerpt from above (page 59), *positive* student feedback, interestingly, also had iterative materialising effects on my teaching practice, similar to worrying about potential negative student feedback:

> *"After one of my taught English sessions, [a colleague] informed me that he had just had a meeting with student representatives and that they were "really happy" with my teaching. […] [As a result of this feedback,] I … asked myself the question, "What can I do in the future to attain the same good student feedback?". I believe this was the moment when I also started feeling a little trapped in my practice. That is, I wanted to continue teaching in a similar fashion so that my students would continue to give me positive student feedback …"* (*My Research Diary*)

In other words, positive feedback "mattered" (in Barad's understanding of the word, i.e. as having a materialising effect and being of significance) in that I tried to iteratively recreate the status quo. This iterative intra-action also excluded other things from mattering, such as decreasing my motivation to be more experimental.

The following excerpt from my interview with Melissa (see page 62) is another example of the entanglement between subpersonal apparatuses and student/lecturer apparatuses. In this interview, Melissa reported on an outright traumatic experience with student feedback in an interview when a student "complained on behalf of the entire course":

> *"… the lowest moment, now I think of it, was in my first term when a student complained about me on behalf of the entire group. [Even though it turned out that] the rest of the group didn't share [this student's opinion] .. it was very, very hard. I think you can feel very isolated at university per se, that kind of thing, you're left, there is more thinking time, but there's also more time to kind of become self-critical I think."* (*Truncated Excerpt. Interview with Melissa*)

This encounter – i.e. when Melissa learned about the negative student feedback – could be understood as yet another apparatus in which Melissa emerged as an "agency of observation" whilst the complaining student emerged as the object (of observation). Similar to my experience with the disrespectful student above, Melissa experienced this as

"more time to kind of become self-critical" (i.e. the experience had a lasting materialising effect). Interestingly, this emerging "self-criticality" could be understood as yet another form of subpersonal iterative intra-action. That is, through student feedback another agential cut was enacted (this time "inside" a person, i.e. "inside" Melissa). More specifically, this agential cut split Melissa's self into one part (agencies of observation) being critical of another (object of observation). This, in return, exacerbated Melissa's feeling of "isolation" at her institution.

c)   Anxiety as a "threat" from the future

This "feedback anxiety" can also be usefully theorised through Brian Massumi's (2010) work on *"threat"* which I argue, in return, resonates with Barad's understanding of space, time and matter. Threat, Massumi suggests, 'is from the future' (p. 53). An avian flu, for instance, does not yet exist; however, it still makes a front-page newspaper headline. This does not, however, mean that 'threat is not real in spite of its nonexistence. It is superlatively real, because of it.' (p. 53). Lisa, for instance, describes in her research diary that the course leader reiterated that "if we don't get better NSS feedback, our department will close":

> *"We were all working frantically to analyse various sections of the results of the NSS. For example, my team was working on one section of the student feedback which tackled the question of academic rigour. My colleagues were particularly elated to find that this section was not even judged that badly by students. We then continued our discussions to try and understand student perceptions of the course and how we could improve it even further." (Excerpt 50. Lisa's research diary)*

In this example, a feeling of threat invades the present from a future which does not yet exist; still this makes it 'superlatively real' (p. 53). Hence, everyone was working "frantically" to improve student feedback. In another section of her research diary, Lisa writes:

> *"I was chatting to Rachel, and she was saying that another colleague was under really bad scrutiny because of students finding her seminars too challenging and too intellectual. Apparently, the colleague was told that if the negative feedback persists, they will have to think about her future employment." (Excerpt 51. Lisa's research diary)*

Again, threat enters the present only through its nonexistence. The job is not lost yet (i.e. unemployment does not yet exist) which, nevertheless, makes joblessness 'superlatively real': Rachel's colleague will try hard to counteract the threat which has not actualised yet. Massumi further observes that 'the future of threat is forever' (p. 53): for example, George W Bush's decision to start a war in Iraq was afterwards justified on the basis that Iraq simply had the *capacity* to produce weapons of mass destruction which it could then have supplied to terrorists. Massumi concludes that the invasion was justified on the basis that 'in the past there was a future threat' (p. 53). Thus, regardless of whether the threat was real or not, it was enough that the threat 'was *felt* to be real' (p. 53; emphasis in original); hence, 'what is not actually real can be felt into being'. Importantly, the threat is 'felt in the form of fear', that is 'fear, as foreshadowing' (p. 54). 'Threat has an impending reality in the present' (p. 54). Massumi then concludes: 'If we feel a threat, there was a threat. Threat is affectively self-causing' (p. 54).

Hence, the threat of negative student feedback and potential redundancy (including the associated feeling of fear) needs to be understood as a fundamental operating principle of the NSS. On this basis, it is possible to justify any preemptive action - such as a university's or a department's strategy to boost student feedback – with the sheer perception of threat. That is, regardless of whether the danger of negative student feedback exists or not,

> 'the felt reality of threat legitimates preemptive action, once and for all. Any action taken to preempt a threat from emerging into a clear and present danger is legitimated by the affective fact of fear, actual facts aside.' (Massumi, 2010:54)

This is where Massumi's work can be brought into conversation with Barad's understanding of space, time and matter. "Threat" could be understood as something which has a materialising effect from the "future". Threat "matters" in that it affects how lecturers, departments and universities behave (come to matter). It is hyperreal and traverses temporal boundaries.

However (going beyond Massumi) through Barad's work, threat may be reconceptualised as having an ontological (material) quality. More specifically, the micro-maser experiments above (see page 170) suggest that the sheer *possibility of knowing which slit an atom travelled through* influences whether atoms become a wave or become a particle. This "becoming" was influenced "*after*" these atoms had already passed through the respective slits and made their mark on a screen. Similarly, it was argued that receptor cells in the eyes of stingrays activate "*before*" light actually arrives at these. In a traditional Newtonian conception of space, this would (paradoxically) mean that the present is changed from the future (i.e. a future event has an effect on a past one). However, from a quantum theoretical perspective, Barad argues this simply means that space, matter and time do not exist in isolation – hence, "*spacetimemattering*" may be a more apt description of what is all around us. This still does not alter the profoundly challenging implications these propositions raise. An event, in this understanding, can become entangled with an event in the "past" or the "future. In Barad's words, 'what seems far off in space and time may be as close or closer than the pulse of here and now' (Barad, 2007:394). Threat, in this sense, could be understood as just one example where certain events become *entangled* across the 'spacetime-matter manifold' (p.246). Therefore, threat could be conceptualised as an example of what Barad (2007:181) argues is a more fundamental ontological quality of the universe where

> 'the past matters and so does the future, but the past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and he future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment; rather the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming'

In other words, threat may be understood as invading the present from the future and exerting power over the present. The anticipation of negative NSS results – which might never fully manifest - has materialising potential on what unfolds in the "present".

d)   Topology and Enfolding

Building on this, the question arises how to theorise together (i) the iterative processes of worrying; (ii) encounters between students and lecturers; (iii) institutional student feedback systems (such as Internal Surveys); and (iv) the National Student Survey. To think the "inside" and "outside" together, resonates with Moore's (2006:487) suggestion that there is a need to 'take account both of sociological and of psychological issues' and that

> 'we need to combine approaches and perspectives that may be perceived as strictly sociological with approaches and perspectives that may be perceived as more strictly psychological.'

Barad's work, in this sense, may be understood as adding another layer of analysis towards troubling some of these bodily boundaries (such as the psychological-sociological or natural-cultural binary). A Baradian take on thinking these different realms together may be found in her notion of "enfolding". Enfolding suggests that apparatuses are enfolded into other apparatuses. This enfolding must not be understood within a geometrical conception of scale - in the sense that one apparatus is nested in another - but rather as the 'agential enfolding of different scales through one another' (p. 245). (In this respect, Barad deviates from DeLanda's (2006) understanding of scale.) The notion of "agential enfolding" may help explain how the change of one enfolded apparatus has the agency to reconfigure the workings of the apparatus into which it is enfolded. Hence, akin to the pyramidal working of power in section 4.1 and Manuel DeLanda's assertion that assemblages can be part of other assemblages (see 6.1), it could, for example, be suggested that my "worrying" (as one apparatus) may be understood as being agentially enfolded into another apparatus (e.g. encounters with students). These, in return, are agentially enfolded into "meso" institutional apparatuses (such as Student Representative Meetings (SRMs) and Internal Surveys) which, yet again, are agentially enfolded into national apparatuses (e.g. national policy implementations such as the NSS). What happens nationally contributes

agentially (*but not deterministically*) to what "*matters*" within the other apparatuses and vice versa.

This notion of enfolding is connected to Barad's understanding of entanglement and the question where an apparatus starts and where it stops. Whilst the preceding section suggested some entanglements across time, entanglement also happens across space. Or put more precisely, entanglement always happens across 'spacetime' (p. 240). That is, apparatuses are not some pre-constituted object perched 'on a shelf waiting to serve a particular purpose'; rather '… any particular apparatus is always in the process of intra-acting with other apparatuses' (Barad, 2007:203). Through this intra-action the apparatuses do not only shift in their relation to one another but also change their own respective topologies which then leads to 'the production of new phenomena, and so on … ' (p. 171). Topology, for Barad refers to how apparatuses connect to other apparatuses and where they form boundaries. This again invites the question: where does the apparatus start and where does it stop? Taking the example of STM images (microscopic logos made, for example, by the company IBM at the scale of atoms), Barad argues that an 'entangled set of practices … go into making these images'. The practices are:

> 'STM microscopes and practices of microscopy, the history of microscopy, scientific and technological advances made possible by scanning tunnelling microscopes, the quantum theory of tunnelling, material sciences, IBM's corporate resources and research and development practices, scientific curiosity and imagination, scientific and cultural hopes for the manipulability of individual atoms, Feynman's dreams of nanotechnologies, cultural iconography, capitalist modes of producing desires, advertising, the production and public recognition of corporate logos, the history of the atom, the assumption of metaphysical individuals, complex sets of visualizing and reading practices that make such images intelligible as pictures of words and things, and the intertwined history of representationalism and scientific practice. This is merely an abbreviated list that doesn't even scratch the surface when it comes to the kinds of genealogies that are needed to give an objective accounting of the micrograph.' (Barad, 2007:360-361)

To put this yet differently: when one apparatus changes, it also has an effect on everything else (ibid.). Apparatuses are enfolded into other apparatuses as well as consisting of other apparatuses (phenomena)

(ibid.). Similarly, the NSS is entangled with a myriad other apparatuses, such as IT systems which students use to fill in the feedback, which are enfolded into the vast structure which is the internet, students' own biographies including their experiences of past schooling etc.

The importance of topology is also captured in the fact that universities could be understood as being enfolded into the NSS (in that they are a part of the NSS); however, universities may also be entangled with other universities which are spatially much further away, thereby traversing "national boundaries". That is, in a neoliberal globalised society, my university may in fact be competing with another Chinese university over Chinese students (see Figure 7).
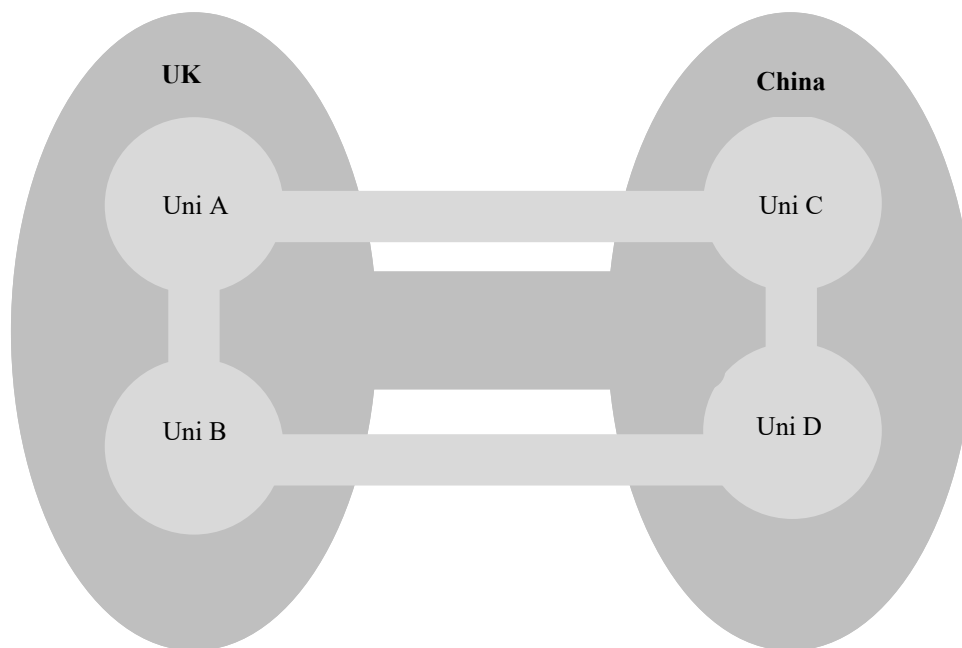

Figure 7: Competitive topologies across national boundaries

It could now be suggested that it is precisely through the enfolding of these apparatuses that the materialising effects of Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET) attain their full-blown force. For example, I consider

the following excerpt in which Lisa reflects on a conversation with a colleague. Both had received mildly negative student feedback in a student representative meeting, and now discussed that

> *…the meetings with student representatives [are] really useful because they allow for change. It is only through the combination of the meetings and [internal surveys] … that the meetings become much more devious. It almost feels a little bit that through having [internal surveys…] that whatever the students say in student rep meetings mutates into something much more powerful and absolute. I feel a little anxious now that my senior colleagues might make this into a bigger deal which will add to my already extensive workload. (Excerpt 52. Lisa's research diary)*

This is where Foucault's notion of power can be incorporated into the current agential realist discussion. Again, power, in its Foucauldian take, is not to be confused with "domination", i.e. a complete state of submission where one person has *no* room for manoeuvring (Lemke, 2002) (such as when a psychiatric patient is tied to a bed and forced to take intravenous medication). Rather, power always involves some room for making choices, however contrived these may be (Foucault, 1982). Building on Foucault's understanding of power, Barad (2007) extends this understanding into *all*, and not only human, realms of reality. Power in this understanding is figured as 'materializing potential' (p. 210). That is, power might involve humans, but could also involve marine animals, such as the 'brittlestar' (p. 375) intra-acting with its environment. Based on this posthuman understanding of power, regarding the previous data excerpt it could be postulated that it is through the agential enfolding of (i) lecturer-student encounters and (ii) institutional feedback systems that student voice developed its "power". In other words, it could be suggested that (a) the intra-action between Lisa and her student feedback attained the power to (b) promote a subpersonal iterative materialisation of anxiety, precisely because both apparatuses (i.e. (a) and (b)) were agentially enfolded into Internal Survey apparatuses. In return, these Internal Surveys attained even more power through various other 'material-discursive practices' (p. 146) such as anxiety ridden team meetings as captured in Lisa's previous diary excerpt:

> *This all is a little worrying. Recently in one of my staff meetings, the course leader suggested that if the course was unable to gain better feedback in internal surveys that the course might be shut down. (Lisa's research diary)*

In addition, the following research diary entry can be revisited (see page 108):

> *I am not teaching this one class any longer as the decision has been made to take this class of me due to negative student feedback from that class. I feel like I really failed on this instance even though I tried really hard to make things accessible and clear. But it is also my students' fault in that they simply don't understand things. But this won't help me much. If this happens in future seminars, I know that I will get into trouble with my line managers. (Lisa's research diary)*

Of course, this now opens the opportunity, to argue that these apparatuses (worrying, student-lecturer encounters, internal survey), in return, are agentially enfolded into national apparatuses, such as the NSS. That is, as outlined in Chapter 4, NSS results are used to enact a market which creates competitive pressures for universities who now start to pay close attention to feedback attained by individual courses. If courses do not manage to improve their student feedback, university lecturers may now focus their attention on internal student feedback systems (Canning, 2017a). In other words, the NSS has the power to "matter" (i.e. increase the materialising potential) in that more importance is allocated to the NSS and Internal Survey results. Both the NSS and Internal Surveys, in return, exacerbated Lisa's anxiety and agentially reconfigured her intra-actions with students. Importantly, it could be hypothesised that it is precisely this anxiety which functions as an intra-active and enfolded "building block" of the NSS. Without anxiety, the NSS may lose its cutting edge.

6.2.3 Differential Gears and Solidarity

This opens the opportunity to explore the question of potential university lecturer agency in the context of an agential realist understanding of the relationship between structure and agency. First, it is important to note that Barad claims that 'structures are apparatuses…' (Barad,

2007:237), thereby conflating the two notions. It could hence be suggested that one set of structures (e.g. the NSS and Internal Surveys) comprises enfolded intra-acting structures (e.g. lecturer-student confrontations and anxiety), the latter functioning as the formers' intra-acting agencies. Barad understands agency as 'the enactment of iterative changes of particular practices…' (p. 178). The moment practice is changed (regardless of whether the cause of this change is a "malfunctioning computer server" or a "student NSS boycott"), agency is enacted.

In the context of "agency", Barad offers a significant theoretical contribution by now considering intra-acting agencies (e.g. universities) of apparatuses (e.g. the NSS) as *"differential gears".* That is, differential gears reside within their respective structures and thus, structures could be understood as 'differential gear assemblages' (p. 239). A crucial feature of differential gears is that one malfunctioning cog *does not break a machine* (in contrast to a conventional gear). For example, if one university lecturer decided to enact her agency by, for instance, refusing to act upon student feedback, this would not significantly affect the functionality of Internal Surveys and the NSS (i.e. it would not "break" the NSS). Put differently, the refusal of one lecturer would lack the agency to reconfigure the structure (i.e. Internal Surveys and the NSS). Rather, this differential gear (i.e. the lecturer) could easily be replaced by another differential gear (i.e. another lecturer). A different picture, however, emerges when considering a range of differential gears breaking (i.e. by a range of lecturers or other stakeholders refusing their participation). That is, a significant reconfiguration of the NSS could only be effected by non-participation of a range of its intra-acting agencies, foremost by students. As had been argued in Chapter 5, whilst lecturer non-participation would leave the market pressures of the NSS intact, students possess the power to prevent the NSS from "mattering" since universities are compelled to have a 50% response rate in order to be included into the NSS rankings (Ipsos, 2017). That is, collective "non-participation" of lecturers and students would be the precondition for the NSS to lose its materialising

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potential (i.e. its power). As already implied in Chapter 5, this almost happened as a result of the 2016 student boycott (Grove, 2016).

This raises one central question. Rather than perpetuating the ongoing boundary creation between lecturers and students, the central question must now centre on how to create connectivity between students and lecturers, especially since students appear to share economic pressures similar to (or worse than) lecturers, necessitating the juggling of part time jobs while facing an uncertain and increasingly precarious employment future (cf. Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). In other words, ways must be found to theorise the NSS in its entanglement with other concurrent policy apparatuses (such as assessment practices and the UK Research Excellence Framework) which promote increasing workload, competitisation (Brown, 2015; Steger, 2010), and *precariatisation* (Lopes and Dewan, 2014). As was argued in Chapter 5, it is perhaps the analogous working of these apparatuses that could explain the atomisation and isolation (Bourdieu, 1998) of lecturers and students, in particular, and of people, more generally. Moreover, the NSS could be understood as being *agentially enfolded* into larger-scale international apparatuses, such as international neoliberal policy practices, international HEI ranking industries (cf. Jöns and Hoyler, 2013; Ordorika and Lloyd, 2015) and bottom up streams of capital distribution (cf. Piketty, 2014) and resultant plutocratisation (Gates, 2000).

As already argued in Chapter 5, it is now somewhat poignant that the NSS may turn out to be precisely the technology which prevents lecturers and students to develop this capacity for joint agency to undermine the functionality of the NSS. For example, further data indicated that as a result of the perceived pressures of student feedback systems, lecturers at Lisa's university increasingly developed a (somewhat covert) negative attitude towards students (i.e. what I called antagonism in Chapter 5). Lisa, for example, notes the following:

> *One of my colleagues continuously complains about students along the lines of "they're never satisfied regardless of what you do" and "they simply can't think for themselves". Then one of these students knocked*

That is, since Barad suggests that materialisations, boundary creations and exclusions always emerge simultaneously as part of their intra-action, I postulate that the NSS functions as an apparatus which – in addition to the materialising effects above - draws iterative boundaries between students and lecturers, thereby preventing potential student-lecturer alliances.

Nevertheless, Barad's notion of a differential gear assemblage perhaps might not only provide a better understanding of how the (post)human subject is thoroughly implicated in - and an agentic part of - the (iterative) maintenance of (neoliberal) structures, but might also provide us with an analytical tool so as to theorise potential ways of subverting and reshaping the naturalcultural becoming at university and beyond. In other words, the aim should centre on arriving at potential strategies to counteract the negative effects of (neoliberal) apparatuses, such as the NSS. That is, instead of students, lecturers, colleagues, senior-colleagues to be played against one another in a reciprocal process (see page 145) that enacts (iterative) boundaries, ways to create connectivity need to be explored. The nature of this renewed "shared agency" (cf. Smith, 2015) may contain a re-evaluation or reassertion of notions of solidarity. That is, the traditional workers' song of "Und erkenne deine Macht/Alle Raeder stehen still wenn dein starker Arm es will" ("And recognise your power. All gears stand still if your strong arm commands it") might attain a reconfigured meaning when read diffractively with Barad's metaphor of the differential gear assemblage. How this solidarity could be promoted and how it could potentially transgress the confines of the university will, however, have to be explored elsewhere, with recent developments in the context of accelerationism perhaps indicating some ways how this may be achieved (see Srnicek and Williams, 2016).

Before moving on to the next section, I would now like to briefly discuss how Barad's work has been taken up in the academic community and

how a selection of relevant studies resonate with my take on Barad's work. In particular, I would like to focus on certain trends in Baradian studies which, I argue, fail to do justice to Barad's agential realism because they either misrepresent or under-utilise the profound potential in her work.

One of these trends is a certain favouring of the (seemingly) "immediate" and 'local' over the "large" and "abstract". This focus on immediacy resonates with Srnicek and Williams's (2013:online) critique of some of the left's valorisation of 'communal immediacy' and 'neo-primitivist localism'. This focus on the immediate and local, under exclusion of the "larger" or "longer", is, for example, captured in Taylor's (2013) account. Whilst rightly allocating agency to material objects and practices in the classroom as producing gendered practices (p. 691), Taylor's analysis remains firmly contained within the locality (i.e. within the confines of the classroom). Hereby, Taylor fails to acknowledge how these classroom objects may connect to other structures which are spatiotemporally larger and further away. In short, precisely the novelty of Barad's work – i.e. that one apparatus (e.g. a chair) may have ontological spatiotemporal connectivities to other apparatuses (e.g. trees and factory workers) and may be enfolded into other apparatuses (e.g. the classroom, the school, the country) - is "excluded from mattering" (to use one of Barad's phrases). Instead, Taylor valorises the 'minutiae of bodily practices' (p. 689) and 'micro practices of matter' (p. 690).

This valorisation of immediacy dominates the Baradian literature base (e.g. Seear, 2013; Ford et al., 2017) and even extends to academic fields with strong temporal qualities. For instance, Alberti and Marshall's (2009) study is situated in *archaeology* but still only focusses on the material qualities of artefacts whilst failing to discuss their temporal connectivities (i.e. those topological relationships which may show stronger connectivity across time than across the immediate space that surrounds them).

Then there are those articles which do theorise the macro and micro in their very entanglement, such as Rosiek (2018) in his discussion

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of racism or Nilsson Sjöberg (2017) in his of ADHD. However, these contributions still fail to reference certain key features in Barad's work, such as her discussion of topology and of the micro-maser experiments.

There are, of course, exceptions to this. For example, Sherfinski and Chesanko (2016) explore the micro-practices of homeschooling whilst also acknowledging their entanglement with environmental, economic, cultural, historical and political processes. I suggest that it is paramount that a "posthuman ontology" or "morethanhuman" ontology should not be restricted to the level of discrete and minute objects and practices, but that it shows how certain apparatuses are 'always in the process of intra-acting with other apparatuses' (Barad, 2007:203). This entanglement of apparatuses also comprises those apparatuses that are dispersed, both temporally and spatially.

This closes this agential realist discussion of the NSS. So far, this section sought to exemplify how Barad's (2007) framework of agential realism has the capacity to theorise the workings of the NSS and its effects on university lecturer practice. It was suggested that by participating in the NSS, lecturers materialised as being increasingly anxious which, in return, reworked the ways how they enacted their practice. It, furthermore, was argued that the NSS simultaneously enacted iterative boundaries between students and lecturers as part of their ongoing intra-action. The intra-actions specific to the NSS also excluded other potential "matterings", such as more experimental approaches to teaching. Lastly, the attempt was made to connect agential realism to a discussion of shared agency and solidarity. In short, if there are no inherent boundaries (and connectivities) in the universe, people (as part of the universe) can actively intervene to redraw some of these boundaries. Hence, whilst the NSS could most fittingly be described as a boundary-drawing, 'material-discursive apparatus of bodily production' (Barad, 2007:218), its disciplinary and competitising qualities may be resisted through the attempt to actively create connectivities between stakeholders.

6.3 A Comparison of Agential Realism and Assemblage Theory

This section explores some fruitful resonances between Barad's agential realism and DeLanda's (2006) assemblage theory (see 6.1). First, I discuss conflicts between both authors. Second, I trace some similarities and differences with the intention of sketching out a combined framework.

Before beginning this "diffractive" reading, it must be mentioned that DeLanda rejects (and even has "contempt" for) Barad's agential realism. DeLanda's rejection transpires in his discussion with Graham Harman. In this discussion, Harman suggest that Barad's take on materialism is a 'materialism without realism' since Barad is

> 'a materialist who … argues that objects have no reality apart from their interactions with the mind; … Although Barad calls her philosophy "agential realism," there is nothing realist about it, since she grants reality no autonomy from the human mind, or at least not from human practices.' (DeLanda and Harman, 2017:3)

This is followed by DeLanda who expresses an outright animosity towards Barad:

> *'I have even more contempt for those who appeal to the worse parts of science – such as Barad.* The idea that the consciousness of the observer determines the actual state of an electron is a myth. It was floated in scientific circles (by von Neumann?) as a funny idea to convey the flavor of the uncertainty principle to non-specialists, but it has no basis whatsoever in experimental science …' (p. 7; emphasis added)

Harman returns to this argument and suggests

> 'Barad and Žižek, … give the human subject an outsized role making up 50 percent of the cosmos. … Barad gives the observer the almost magical power of co-creating the universe, and Zizek holds that the thinking subject is so important and unique that it had to be created through some sort of "ontological catastrophe."' (p. 8)

Unfortunately, these assertions mispresent Barad's work profoundly (as also discussed by de Freitas, 2017), raising the question as to whether either author has read Barad's (2007) work at the depth it deserves. In short, Barad could not be further from claiming that reality has 'no autonomy from the human mind', or that human subjects

make 'up 50 percent of the cosmos'. In fact, large parts of her discussion make direct opposite claims, for instance in her discussion of the 'brittlestar' (Barad, 2007:375), a marine animal, which brings phenomena (including its own "knowing" body) into existence through its intra-action with its surroundings. This posthuman ontology is ubiquitously reiterated throughout her work. For instance, she argues that 'human practices are not the only practices that come to matter…' (p. 206) and that her posthumanism 'is not calibrated to the human … taking issue with human exceptionalism' (p. 136). Similarly, DeLanda's claim that Barad suggests that 'the consciousness of the observer determines the actual state of an electron' (DeLanda and Harman, 2017:8) constitutes a misreading of her work. Yes, Barad suggest that human minds can become "entangled" with quantum phenomena when humans are involved, but humans are not a pre-requisite for these phenomena to emerge. More specifically, in the micro-maser 'quantum-erasure' experiment (2007:311), the *possibility of knowing* the location of an atom makes this atom "become" a particle. Whether the researcher actually decides to look at this location information is irrelevant (i.e. it does not change the phenomenon in question) as long as the possibility of knowing this information is maintained.

Despite DeLanda's misinterpretation of Barad's work, I maintain that agential realism and assemblage theory share many similarities which go beyond their mutual affiliation with what has come to be known as the "new materialisms", especially when reading both authors' respective projects closely. For instance, DeLanda's concept of the assemblage and Barad's understanding of the apparatus are congruous in various important respects. That is, first, whilst DeLanda argues that assemblages may consist of smaller scale assemblages (e.g. the NSS consists of universities, which consist of courses etc.), in Barad's understanding, apparatuses can be enfolded into one another. In short, apparatuses are enfolded into (DeLanda: assemblages can be component parts of) other apparatuses (DeLanda: assemblages); and apparatuses can intra-act (DeLanda: interact) with other apparatuses (DeLanda: assemblages). Moreover, DeLanda and

Barad resonate regarding (some of) their metaphysical assumptions. For instance, as implied above, both authors reject anthropocentrism by arguing for the existence of a world beyond that of human experience. In this respect, both authors also share an interest in traversing the boundaries between the "social" and the "natural". For example, both "apparatuses" (Barad, 2007) and "assemblages" (DeLanda, 2016) exist in social and natural realms. More specifically, DeLanda consistently outlines the interconnections between natural and social assemblages in that for example, nation-states contain both social (e.g. conversations, interpersonal networks) and natural (e.g. infrastructures; genetic codes; bacteria) component parts. Barad, going somewhat further, challenges any *a priori* distinction between the social and the natural which is captured in her preference for the neologism of 'naturalcultural practices' (Barad, 2007:225).

Yet, there are also important differences between the two authors which will be tackled in what follows. As mentioned above, Barad's (2007) concept of "enfolding" (as discussed on page 184) is not to be understood within a geometrical conception of scale (in the sense that one apparatus is nested in another) but rather in a topological sense, i.e. as the 'agential enfolding of different scales through one another' (p. 245). It was argued that this makes it possible to theorise how one "smaller" enfolded apparatus has the agency to reconfigure the workings of the apparatus into which it is enfolded (see section 6.2.2d). This privileging of topology over issues of scale is captured in the following quote:

> 'During a transatlantic flight from New York to London, at a cruising altitude of thirty-five thousand feet, a communications link between an Intel-based notebook computer, perched on a tray in front of the passenger in seat 3A of the Boeing 747, and a Sun workstation on the twentieth floor in a Merrill Lynch brokerage house in Sydney initiates the transfer of investment capital from a Swiss bank account to a corporate venture involving a Zhejiang textile mill. The event produces an ambiguity of scale that defies geometrical analysis. Proximity and location become ineffective measures of spatiality. Distance loses its objectivity – its edge – to pressing questions of boundary and connectivity. Geometry gives way to changing topologies as the transfer of a specific patterns of zeros and ones, represented as so many pixels on

a screen, induces the flow of capital and a consequent change in the material conditions of the Zhejiang mill and surrounding community. With the click of a mouse, space, time, and matter are mutually reconfigured in this cyborg "trans-action" that transgresses and reworks the boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture, and economic and discursive practices.' (Barad, 2007:223)

Similarly, a university lecturer could be lying on a beach in Australia or dancing in a nightclub in Tokyo whilst looking at the responses of the latest National Student Survey. A student may be partying on Ibiza or picking fruit on New Zealand whilst filling in the NSS. In addition, as argued above, Reddish University may be competing and collaborating across national boundaries. Topology[21] undoubtedly is important, particularly in the age of the Internet. Scale shrinks in importance when global communication is possible close to the speed of light.

On the other hand, in her favouring of "issues of topology" over "issues of scale", Barad, unfortunately, is unclear with respect to her exact definition of scale, especially her understanding of the relativity of size. For instance, it would be difficult to maintain that the NSS (as a national apparatus) is not in some sense larger than Internal Surveys (as institutional apparatuses), in return being somewhat larger than, for example, "confrontations with students" (as micro-scale apparatuses).

This is where DeLanda's assemblage theory usefully complements Barad's framework. Similar to Barad, DeLanda eschews a geometrical understanding of scale whilst nevertheless holding on to the notion of "bigger than" and "smaller than". That is, rather than figuring "larger-scale" as, for example, 'one nation-state' occupying 'a larger

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[21] It needs to be mentioned that DeLanda also heavily utilises the conception of topology in the context of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "virtual" (i.e. a possibility space of unexercised capacities). For example, a body plan for all vertebrates may be characterised only by its topological relations (e.g. in 'the overall connectivity of the different parts of the body' (DeLanda, 2006:29). How this topology is then actualised (e.g. in humans, pigs or cows) varies whilst the topological possibility space persists. I have decided that it would go beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a thorough account of this understanding and have therefore made the choice to exclude it.

area than another', DeLanda conceptualises the relationship between "smaller-scale" and "larger-scale" through the relationship between 'number of components', such as 'number of members' of a larger-scale entity (DeLanda, 2006:12). Put simply, a university is larger-scale than its component parts (e.g. its staff and students); the UK higher education sector, in return, is of a larger-scale than the number of its respective components (e.g. the number of its universities). As was already indicated in section 6.2.2, this allows a holding onto the classic sociological realms of micro, meso and macro whilst adding a "psychological[22]" or 'subpersonal' (DeLanda, 2006) realm. Furthermore, a conception of scale is also important when considering how to resist the NSS. As mentioned in Chapter 5, it matters whether two or 300,000 students decide to boycott the NSS. Similarly, it matters whether one or 50 universities comply with the regulations of the NSS.

As a joint reading, it could hence be suggested that issues of scale and issues of topology should be conceptualised together. That is, topology may be more important in that universities may be competing (or cooperating) with other universities both within the UK and across UK boundaries. In this case, it is more about issues of connectivity and boundary creation. Nevertheless, scale also matters. Firstly, 'geometric' (DeLanda, 2006:6) conceptions of scale matter (i.e. have a materialising effect) in that, for instance, only wealthier domestic students may be able to study further away from their hometown, and only wealthier international students may be able to afford tuition fees and accommodation costs in the UK. Similarly, a "non-geometric" understanding of scale matters in that the 'number of components' (p.7) (e.g. universities and students) influence supply and demand. That is, the larger the number of universities who compete over a certain number of students, the less these universities (theoretically) would be able to

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[22] This psychological realm could be figured as having a myriad of further apparatuses enfolded into it from neurons intra-acting with other neurons; to connectivities between brain and other emotional networks of the body; apparatuses that are outside of commonsensical human boundaries to neuro-transmitters to photons intra-acting with receptor cells in the human eye.

charge. To the contrary, the larger the number of students who compete over a certain university, the more these universities can demand in return. For instance, Oxford may be able to demand higher qualifications (whilst tuition fees are restricted by national policy) whereas some other international universities (whose tuition fees are not capped) can demand higher tuition fees.

There are further important differences between DeLanda's assemblages and Barad's apparatuses. Whilst the "component parts" of assemblages act in relations of *exteriority* (i.e. the component parts retain their identity and could be plugged into other assemblages), Barad's notion of the apparatus sits between DeLanda's "assemblages" and Hegel's "seamless totalities" in that intra-action creates 'exteriority within' (Barad, 2007:377). More specifically, Barad's conception of intra-action resonates with Hegel's notion of interiority[23] in that subject and object emerge *as part of* their intra-action whilst outside this intra-action they do not exist as such. The exteriority (within intra-action), on the other hand, is created through the agential cut which delineates subject from object. According to Barad it is, in fact, impossible to ever step outside of intra-action, not even in the hypothetical scenario where space-travel may make it possible to view the universe in its entirety. Still, there would be intra-action between the observer (i.e. the person in the spaceship), on the one hand, and the rest of the universe, on the other. To conclude this comparison, Table 3 provides a summary of similarities and differences between DeLanda's and Barad's paradigms.

Table 3: A comparison between DeLanda's and Barad's framework

	Manuel DeLanda	**Karen Barad**

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[23] De Freitas (2017) also discusses Barad and Hegel, but by contrasting Barad's diffractive methodology with Hegel's negative dialectics.

Theoretical Framework	Assemblage Theory	Agential Realism
Key notions	Interaction	Intra-action
	Assemblage	Apparatus
	Component (Part)	Intra-acting agency / Subject-Object
Similarities	• Component parts can be assemblages themselves. • Intra-acting agencies can be apparatuses themselves.	
Differences	• Entities pre-exist their encounters.	• Entities emerge from (and do not pre-exist) their encounters.
	• Component parts may retain their individuality. For example, a human heart remains a human heart when transplanted. Yet, component parts may perish when they are	• Intra-acting agencies (i.e. subjects and objects) are fully contingent on their specific intra-action.

	not plugged into another assemblage. For example, if a heart, after being removed from the body, is not transplanted, it dies.	
	• Assemblage: Component parts exist in 'relations of exteriority' (DeLanda, 2006:11).	• Apparatus: "Components" exist in relations of 'exteriority within' (Barad, 2007:340), i.e. a cutting 'together and apart' (p. 394).
	• Issues of scale are figured as parts to the whole relationships. For example, a meso assemblage (e.g. a university) exists in a part to whole relationship to	• Issues of Scale are undertheorised whilst prominence is given to 'topology' (Barad, 2007:240), i.e. where apparatuses connect and where

	a macro assemblage (e.g. a country).	they form boundaries.
	• Topology is theorised in the context of the 'diagram' and its outline of 'quasi-causal topological constraints' (DeLanda, 2006:31)	

6.4   --- Paradigmatic Interlude ---

This section is a (necessary) rupture within this thesis. Since agential realism is not just one specific theory which applies to a very specific field, but rather concerns the ontology of this universe, this section outlines some of the implications of agential realism on how to understand research and its underlying paradigm. Therefore, this section could be understood as an addition to (and perhaps a troubling of) the paradigmatic considerations outlined in the methodology chapter of this thesis. That is, since a researcher's ontology has implications on her epistemology and, hence, methodology (see Chapter 3), a few implications of Barad's framework on methodology will be outlined. More specifically, this section revisits some of the methodological underpinnings of this thesis to then show how agential realisms shifts an understanding thereof. Thereafter, some limitations of Barad's agential realism will be explored and some alternative conceptualisations proposed.

6.4.1 Methodological Implications of Barad's Framework

The following section will now elaborate an agential realist take on methodological issues, such as data collection methods and data analysis. A particular focus will be on agential realism's distinctly post-human dimension where both human and non-human entities enact their agency. First, interviews will be discussed. Under agential realism, rather than using the concept of an inter-view – i.e. as the position between views (Barbour and Schostak, 2005) – interviews may be more fittingly described as intra-views in which "interviewee" and "interviewed" materialise through, instead of pre-existing, their encounter. To exemplify this, the interview with Stacey will be considered (see page 64). This interview was conducted in a small room on the second floor of a large campus building of a medium-sized post-92 university. Agential realistically speaking (Barad's (2007) key notions in italics), it could be suggested that it was through *intra-action* that Stacey and I emerged, or *mattered*. This also included specific marks that were left on bodies. More precisely, when I listened to Stacey, I *materialised* as the *agencies of observation* which were *marked* by Stacey who emerged as the *object of observation*. When I asked interview questions, the opposite was the case (i.e. Stacey = *agencies of observation*; myself = *object of observation*). Furthermore, the tape recorder emerged more permanently as the agencies of observation because of being "*marked*" by our dialogue (in that the tape recorder recorded our conversation). These marks in themselves could be understood not as static imprints, but rather as *material-discursive matterings* in their own right. In this respect, marks could also be understood as the marks left on mine and Stacey's minds, in the shape of memories (for a more thorough theorisation of memories as representations see 6.4.2a). Further *material-discursive practices* (i.e. *apparatuses*) were implicated in this *intra-action* whilst it is only through the enactment of these practices that they *became meaningful*. That is, 'discursive practices are always already material' (Barad, 2007:152): they have a material quality both "in the brain" and "outside" in the social world" whilst

the *boundaries* between the brain and the "outer-world" are enacted (and do not pre-exist *intra-action*).

Moving on to the transcription process which happened "after" I conducted the interview, certain important *inclusions* and *exclusions* were enacted. Implicated in these, were both human and nonhuman *agencies*. For example, the tape recorder (as a *nonhuman agency*) actively excluded visual, olfactory and other perceptual qualities of the original interview. This *mattered*, because the lack of these qualities influenced my later interview transcription which, yet again, needs to be understood as an *intra-active* process with associated *exclusions* and *inclusions*. Importantly, this interview transcription process was different from all the other times when I was transcribing, because this time I used different software to aid the transcription process. This, in return, produced different *matterings*. Since the process of "transcribing", however, does not exist solely in the mind of the researcher (i.e. my mind), but is part of a *naturalcultural* practice (which includes language, written words, computers, habits, etc.) 'what *matters* and what is *excluded from mattering'* (Barad, 2007:394; emphasis added) in transcription processes are not entirely subjective *matters*. More precisely, the whole notion of *subjectivity* and *objectivity* as a binary must be contested because there simply is no independent "outside reality" (Barad, 2007:394), i.e. an objective exteriority, in the first place. Rather this exteriority is *exteriority within*, i.e. the result of *intra-action* (a '*cutting-together and apart')*.

What else mattered in this transcription process? I suggest that the fact that I am not an English native speaker had a materialising effect. Being a non-native speaker creates different *intra-actions* from people who speak English as their first language. I wrote in my research diary that

> *I am sometimes finding this transcription process really difficult and I think that this has something to do with the fact that I'm not a native speaker. I remember that I once needed to transcribe a video on YouTube and even though my English was probably almost as fluent as it is now, I still did not understand certain words. When I then asked my partner to listen to those phrases I could not figure out, she was instantly able to tell me what they were. (Excerpt 54. My research diary)*

In other words, the interview recording intra-actively activated and re-shaped my brain differently from my partner who has English as her first language. Yet, I - as one particular non-native speaker of English – do not share "identical" experiences with all the other "thirty-something year old", "German", "lower middle class", "male", "former primary school teacher", "left-wing", "early career social science researchers". My experience was (is and will be) "non-identical" which made certain things *matter* whilst *excluding* others. All of these *intra-actions* (with *past, present and future (!)* experiences) determined how my body (including its brain), as well as the computer (on which I was transcribing), *topologically reconfigured.* Both my computer and I have *power* – i.e. *materialising potential* - in this *iterative performativity*. For example, a slow computer makes transcribing harder than a faster one.

Moving on to the data collection method of *narrative writing*, McLaren (2002:92) suggest that narratives help to 'share our social reality as much by what they exclude as what they include'. Similarly, according to Barad (2007) intra-action always entails exclusions and inclusions; however, these are not limited to human practices. Instead, all practices (including those which do not involve humans) entail inclusions and exclusions. Hence, narrative writing is a specific type of *intra-action*, a *material-discursive practice* which may change various other *material-discursive practices* of which we are a part. For example, reflective writing can reshape how we think about our professional practice, such as "writing an academic paper" or "teaching". By reshaping what we think about our practice, we may also reshape what might be *possible* in the future. I reflect in my research diary:

> *Using my own situation as an example, structure has to be understood as the totality of **intra-acting agencies** which impacts on my own life as a researcher and associate lecturer who researches and teaches at an old-polytechnic university in the UK. Through reflective writing about my situation, I bring into existence/make explicit one particular viewpoint of my professional practice and get better at articulating this version. In other words, I **reconfigure** my view of my professional practice in a way which makes certain things **matter** while **excluding** others from mattering. And every reflection slightly shifts the **boundaries** and **connection** points of my view of my practice. It is through the **reconfiguration** of both the **topology** of my word document as well as the*

Data analysis. This section now turns to discuss data analysis which is also reconceptualised through the application of agential realism. First, the analytical method often labelled as *coding* (Cohen et al., 2007) is considered. "Coding" stems from the research methodology of grounded theory. By repeatedly exploring data, the researcher recognises similarities between data sets which leads to the emergence of themes. This, in return, may then lead to theory formation (Corbin and Holt, 2004). I, for example, arrived at the category of "student feedback as an imposition for lecturers" through the coding of data.

As already suggested, agential realism invites a conceptualisation of coding as "diffraction" (Barad, 2007; agential realist terms, yet again, in italics). Akin to diffraction in which waves immerse through one another, coding could be viewed as the immersion of participants' stories through one another, including our 'specific histories within academe, and the context in which the article is to be published' (Zabrodska et al., 2011:711). The same applies to theoretical frameworks and data. That is, data and theoretical framework could be conceptualised as *agencies* which *intra-act*, *emerge as part of* this intra-action and are *diffracted* through one another to produce certain *phenomena* (cf. Barad, 2007). This also means that what constitutes the "object" of enquiry (and how this object unfolds in the process of writing) will never sit still, but will reconfigure in the process of writing and reading.

More specifically, an agential realist approach changes how data is understood. Data, instead of having an external existence, comes to life through a complex set of *intra-actions*. Put bluntly, data only "*matters*" when someone *intra-acts* with it. Through this intra-action various human and nonhuman *agencies* emerge. In data analysis, these agencies may comprise (i) the researcher's conscious (and unconscious) concepts (i.e. "*material discursive practices*"); (ii) data; (iii)

the precise location of the researcher (e.g. whether he or she is work-ing from home or from an office). Further agencies are (iv) the body of the researcher (e.g. thought processes, hormonal and neurotransmit-ter levels, orthopaedic and prosthetic enhancements, dietary pro-cesses); and (v) the computer (again, work can be slowed down by a slow computer). Of course, these *intra-acting agencies* continuously shift their *topology*, i.e. their *connectivities* and *boundaries* (see 6.2.2d). For example, Foucault's theory of neo-liberal governmentality made certain *meanings matter* when it started to *intra-act* with my data whilst his concept of "discipline" produced different meanings. Simi-larly, data is not passive in that I (in the active subject position) use a tool (e.g. governmentality) to passively gaze at the data (the passive research object). Instead, theory, data, and I immersed through one another and in the process reconfigured by variously becoming subject and object in a 'differential dance of intelligibility and unintelligibility' (Barad, 2007:149). At specific points, the stories of my research par-ticipants and my own researcher self, for example, could be seen as waves *diffracting* with one another. This led to *positive interferences* (*matterings* in the shape of themes, new ideas) and *negative interfer-ences* (*exclusions* in the shape of all these things which did not be-come clear). Barad (2007) argues that the notion of *diffraction* is pow-erful because when waves (e.g. participants' stories) *intra-act*, they sometimes strengthen and sometimes subtract from one another; sometimes, they produce new *phenomena* altogether (i.e. the visually novel patterns on the edges of constructive and destructive *diffraction patterns*).

6.4.2   Issues with Agential Realism

Moving on from methodological implications, this section seeks to problematise agential realism. This section has been included into this paradigmatic interlude because it does not add many (direct) analytical insights into the operation of the NSS as such, but rather further theo-rises how internal experience may connect to the outside world. The

paradigmatic interlude appeared as the most viable space to provide an inclusion of these issues. At this stage, I feel the need to highlight that other authors have problematised Barad's work. Rather strange accusations comprise that Barad somehow denies "experience" and "subjectivity" (Braunmühl, 2018) (correction: Barad does not deny this, but goes beyond this by arguing that subjectivity is not restricted to humans or even animals). Others accuse Barad of a lack of 'epistemological theorizing' (Calvert-Minor, 2014) (Correction: Barad's epistemology is clearly articulated throughout her work in the shape of her *onto-epistemology*). On the other hand, Aigner and Čičigoj (2014) raise the legitimate question of how "abstractions" could be theorised through Barad's work. More specifically, they ask the question how commonalities between certain groups could be conceptualised through an agential realist framework (this connects to my second critique below).

My first critique of agential realism can be tackled concisely. This issue concerns what could be called the "all-encompassing nature of intra-action". In short, Barad argues that *everything* in the universe which involves matter or meaning making practices is the result of intra-actions. This has to be understood quite literally, since intra-action spans the microscopic and macroscopic. For example, intra-action may comprise "light particles" coming into existence through intra-action with its "apparatus"; "humans" coming into existence through intraaction with other "humans"; "buildings" coming into existence through intra-action with the "ground"; "reconfigured working conditions" coming into existence through intra-action with "computers", "millionaires" and "capital"; and "planets" coming into existence through intra-action with "star systems". Through its overdetermination, intra-action hence becomes a useful term to theorise just about everything in the universe. Importantly, whilst critics may argue that this makes it a meaningless notion, it could also be suggested that this overdetermination is actually a strength because of intra-action's universal applicability.

In what follows, I problematise two further aspects of agential realism. First, I will tackle Barad's rejection of "representationalism". Next, I move on to theorise language from an agential realist viewpoint.

a) Barad's anti-representationalism: towards an agential realist theorisation of the brain

One of the central tenets of Barad's work is her rejection of representationalism. More specifically, Barad critiques 'the representationalist belief in the power of words to mirror preexisting phenomena' (Barad, 2007:133). She argues that this 'is the metaphysical substrate that supports social constructivist, as well as traditional realist, beliefs, perpetuating the endless recycling of untenable options' (p. 133). Tracing representationalism back to Cartesian mind-body dualism and Newtonian conceptualisations of the existence of separate entities in a Euclidian space, her argument against representationalist thinking is that there is not simply a world out there which is then represented by ideas inside, but that we are part of and implicated in the material meaning-making-practices of this world. Meaning-making is not restricted to human practices but can include, for example, the meaning making practices of animals, such as the 'brittlestar' above (Barad, 2007:375).

Yet, this outright rejection of representationalist thinking may prove problematic when trying to explain certain "internal" phenomena, such as "worrying" (see section 6.2.2b)) or "dreaming". Representationalism, at first glance, appears better equipped to respond to this "internality of experience". Since Barad, however, rejects representationalism and its associated Cartesian mind-body dualism, what may an agential realist take on internal processes be? Despite Barad's relative silence on this topic, I propose the following. *An agential realist understanding would figure the mind as a collection of intra-acting apparatuses.* In this view, thoughts and dreams are "materialisations" in their own right which have the potential to remain either internal (dreams) or intra-act with the wider world. Hence, against Barad's rejection of representationalism, representations could themselves be

figured as *material-discursive apparatuses* which are not simply in, but part of this world.

I furthermore suggest that this take is consistent with some neuroscientific understandings of the (human) brain, an area which Barad leaves underexplored. In fact, she only mentions the brain in her description of the 'brittlestar' (Barad, 2007:372) – here, knowing and mattering do not require a brain (i.e. the brittlestar has no brain) – and in the context of the "intra-activity of seeing", but only as a side note (p. 156). Barad's rejection of the importance of the brain can be traced in her claim that

> 'memory does not reside in the folds of individual brains, rather, memory is the enfoldings of spacetimematter written into the universe, or better, the enfolded articulations of the universe in its mattering.' (p. ix)

Despite Barad's downplaying of the importance of (human) brains, I suggest that agential realism is actually well equipped to theorise the brain. This also resonates with other theoretical developments in the field (Wendt, 2015; de Freitas and Sinclair, 2018). Whilst a genuine dialogue between Barad's iterativity and neuro-cognitive theories would go beyond the scope of this thesis, it may hence be worth briefly exploring the ways in which Barad's proposed simultaneity of matter and meaning resonates with the idea of neuro-cognitive processes and circuits. To begin with, I return to the example above in which student feedback systems produced iterative processes of worrying and suggest that Barad's notion of *iterativity* is consistent with some neuroscientific research, more specifically with the idea of 'neural circuit' activations (Liberzon et al., 2015:117). In fact, neural circuits may constitute a perfect example of how matter and meaning emerge simultaneously: it is through the *iterative* activation of brain cells (a circuit!) that human consciousness – and the experience of anxiety - is possible. This would also enable an understanding of why "worrying" sometimes appears to be relatively shielded from the outside world. For example, in one instance in which students gave me negative feedback, I was worrying about this feedback at home whilst sitting on the sofa:

Yesterday, I was sitting on the sofa and kept on worrying about the fact that some students weren't quite happy with my last few sessions. They simply found them too hard and not enough examples. It annoys me that I don't even seem to be able to relax in the evenings any longer. (Excerpt 56. My research diary)

That is, the experience of student feedback reconfigured the 'iterative intra-activity' (p. 210) of my brain and therefore liberated the process of anxiety from the moment of its inception[24].

Similarly, *dreams* are shielded from the outside world at the time of happening. In fact, agential realism may figure dreams as 'phenomena' (p. 206) produced through agential intra-activity inside the brain. For example, it could be hypothesised that various brain regions are the brain's intra-acting agencies. These regions have come to matter and have reconfigured through past intra-actions with the world (this reconfiguration is often described under the phenomenon of "neuroplasticity" (Malabou, 2008)). Even more importantly, these regions, of course, could themselves be understood as apparatuses which consist of agential intra-activity: the brain regions themselves consist of a myriad intra-acting ("smaller") apparatuses, which themselves are made up of other ("even smaller") apparatuses etc. (e.g. smaller brain cell clusters, consisting of brain-cells, consisting of molecules, electron flows, atoms, protons etc.). DeLanda's (2006) conception of scale is relevant once again here. Brain cells need to be understood as being somewhat smaller than a whole brain region. That is, building on the previous section, it makes sense to view these cellular, molecular and atomic apparatuses as somehow smaller and in a 'part-to-whole relation' with larger brain regions (p. 40).

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[24] In could, on the other hand, be suggested that this postulated "relative autonomy of the brain" during sleep could also be contested from an agential realist perspective when taking into consideration Barad's rejection of Newtonian physics, i.e. dreaming is not viewed in the context of a linear progression of time through space. An agential realist perspective takes spacetimemattering as the basic operating principles of the universe. It is particularly the micro-maser experiment above which suggests that space, time and matter are not separate entities, but are rather "quantum entangled". Importantly, this experiment shows paradoxical findings from a Newtonian perspective of space and time because, as has been argued, the past could be changed in the present.

Yet, all of these "sub-apparatuses" also are in complex and *topological* (and not only 'geometrical') relations with one another (Barad, 2007:223). These brain regions intra-act with one another and are, most importantly, inseparable from the phenomena produced. At the same time, brain regions have to be seen in their agential inseparability from all the other brain regions, some of which are less malleable by experience (e.g. the brain stem (O'Shea, 2005)) than others (e.g. the cortex). Simultaneously, the brain needs to be understood as being in constant intra-activity with the rest of the body. In fact, the notion of geometrical spatiality (again) loses its meaning when the intricate topological relationship between the body and brain are considered. For example, one could legitimately ask where the (electrical) topological connectivity might be stronger: between (i) certain brain regions and their corresponding parts in the body or (ii) between neighbouring (proximal) brain regions. For example, the primary motor cortex (Nolte, 2009), located within the frontal lobe, is often understood to be an interactive map of the whole body[25]. If the body is, in fact, mapped onto this brain region - and agential realistically speaking is in constant intra-action with this region - connectivity may, in fact, be weaker between this primary motor cortex and its neighbouring brain regions (even though these are in closer geometrical proximity) than between the primary motor cortex and, for example, the right thumb. Moreover, brain regions and their bodily connections are in constant intra-action with the surrounding world. Whilst sense-activity is reduced when the body sleeps, the body still is connected to the outer world; for example, through respiration, temperature, bodily contact points with the bed, gravity etc.

Representations, however, are also important when being awake. In fact, representations emerge as intra-acting agencies when they intra-act with other agencies in this world, some of which may "emerge"

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[25] Even though it has to be acknowledged that this is a simplification and that there always are significant overlaps between parts of the brain which are associated with other parts and movements of the body (e.g. Meier et al., 2008).

outside the human body. For example, I imagine myself looking at student feedback on my computer at my desk. In this process of looking, the computer could be seen as one apparatus (i.e. an intra-acting agency) which intra-acts with my representations (as active neural "matterings"). Part of this intra-action is that individual words now emerge as bounded objects. This process is also entangled with further intra-acting agencies which may comprise the light which is reflected off the screen (e.g. from the sun or an electric bulb); the screen itself, as a product of past intra-actions (e.g. factory workers who assembled the specific computer; exploitative practices in factories); connected practices of computer technology; and my "iterative" habits of engaging with computers. Then there are my eyes performing those "micro intra-actions" whilst being involved in a whole intra-active causal chain which comprises lenses, retinas, muscular movements, blood flows, optic nerves, chiasms, tracts (Nolte, 2009) my thalamus, visual cortex, the dorsal and ventral streams, and those complex (and still poorly understood) neural language networks (Tovée, 2008). Further intra-acting agencies are the discourses circulating in society regarding computers, students, feedback, work practices; my own stress levels; my unique biography; the neurotransmitter levels in my brain as well as other hormonal, nutritional aspects and the surrounding room. This list of entangled 'naturalcultural practices' (Barad, 2007:232) is not endless, but could still go on.

In summary, instead of perpetuating Barad's accusation that representationalism potentially reinforces a mind-body dualism, *representations could be figured as embodied, material 'intra-acting agencies' (Barad, 2007:33) which are the result of and intra-act with past and present 'naturalcultural practices' (p. 232; emphasis added).* Brain cell clusters, visual cortices, eyes, screens, computer chips, processors and keyboards do not pre-exist their encounter, but rather emerge through this encounter. Using a copy of the diagram which sought to visualise the topological relationships between universities (see page

186), Figure 8 seeks to visualise (again in drastically reduced complexity) some of the topologies inside the brain and how they traverse bodily boundaries.
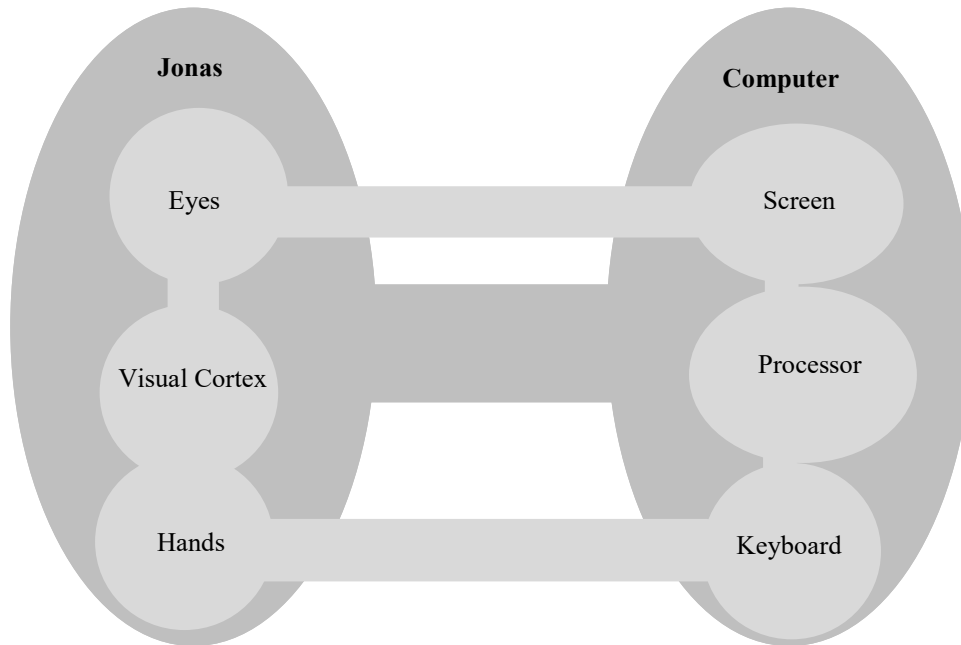

Figure 8: Topologies involving the brain and surroundings

b)   Barad's under-theorisation of language

'The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every "thing"- even materiality - is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation.' (Barad, 2007:133)

Barad's rejection of representationalism is strongly connected to her critique of language, i.e. of 'linguistic monism' (p. 133). Barad argues that '[l]anguage has been granted too much power' in twentieth century philosophy and asks 'how did language come to be more trustworthy than matter?' (p. 132). This privileging of language is, indeed, problematic. For example, it excludes any non-linguistic meaning making practice as evident in the decision-making practices of animals – i.e. animals famously are unable to acquire language, yet, can still recognise people and form memories (Wynne, 2004). It also downplays the importance of non-biological matter and dynamism. For example,

lightning strikes or earthquakes clearly have agentic qualities (as understood in Barad's version of agency), e.g. by being able to kill.

Whilst this rejection of linguistic monism had already been enthusiastically adopted by qualitative researchers (e.g. St.Pierre, 1997) in what may be described as a broadly Deleuzian ontology, it could be suggested that Barad (2007:146) goes too far in her under-theorisation of language, for example when arguing that:

> 'Discourse is not a synonym for language. Discourse does not refer to linguistic or signifying systems, grammars, speech acts, or conversations. To think of discourse as mere spoken or written words forming descriptive statements is to enact the mistake of representationalist thinking.' (Barad, 2007:146)

The critical question could be posed: is the notion "discourse" even needed when its origin – i.e. language– is completely removed from its conceptual framing? Put bluntly, if discourse really has nothing to do with language, why not simply use the word "practice"? Hence, in her objections regarding the importance of language, Barad spins the wheel too far and, thus, under-theorises language by failing to show its precise place in her ontology[26]. The question emerges, "How does language matter?"

As a productive way forward, an agential realist reading of language could be suggested by providing a diffractive reading of Barad's and James Paul Gee's (2005) work (see page 48 above). For instance, it could be suggested that instead of reducing the importance of 'linguistic and signifying systems, grammars, speech acts, or conversations' (Barad, 2007:146), these linguistic phenomena could be figured as intra-acting agencies in their own right - similar to the discussion of representations in the preceding section. Language, hence, could be understood as *one* (but not the sole) material-discursive practice (i.e. an apparatus) which intra-acts with other non-linguistic apparatuses. If we are, as Barad argues, not simply 'in the world', but 'part of the world' (Barad, 2007:91), so is language.

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[26] At least she does so in Meeting the Universe Halfway (Barad, 2007). In another paper she engages with Derrida's Deconstructionism

Importantly, in this framework, language has power (i.e. material-ising potential' (Barad, 2007:210)). For example, grammar has a meaningful implication on how the world matters (cf. Gee, 2005) in that if a sentence is changed from passive voice to active voice this enacts a specific agential cut (whilst excluding other potential ways of mean-ing). This, in return, makes the subject of that sentence materialise as "being in charge" of events (it allocates it more agency) whereas a passive sentence construction makes the subject materialise as being "less in charge" (and responsible). For example, if I use the language construction: "The course leader told us that we need to raise better student feedback", this makes the course leader materialise as an ac-tive agent whereas when this is changed to, "We were told that we need to raise student feedback", this excludes the active role of the subject. An agential realist understanding may, hence, figure both lin-guistic and non-linguistic elements as entangled 'becomings' (Barad, 2007:393) in which language is not understood as a separate entity which then inter-acts with other entities in world, but as a specific intra-acting agency which is inseparable from the phenomena produced. Hence,

> '[Language matters] in that we continually and actively build and re-build our worlds not just through language but through language used in [intra-action with] actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol sys-tems, objects, tools, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, val-uing, feeling, and believing.' (Gee, 2005:10; original changed to suit analysis)

Furthermore, Gee argues that people build their reality 'in more or less routine ways' (p. 10). This routine is captured in Barad's notion of '*iterative intra-actions*' (Barad, 2007:179; emphasis in original). For ex-ample, Melissa's traumatic experience with student feedback was a product of various intra-acting agencies, comprising the 'feeling' (Gee, 2005:10) of rejection, enfolded past experiences, the 'technology' (p. 10) of online feedback systems, of past intra-actions with the students and many other agencies which were not explicitly mentioned in her interview transcript.

Turning to Gee's (2005) *"building tasks",* all material discursive practices (including language), firstly, build 'significance' (p. 11) in that they 'matter' (Barad, 2007; 180) whilst language is one way to build this "significance". *That is,* bodies, rooms, non-linguistic concepts and language matter simultaneously (i.e. they materialise and become meaningful) whilst excluding other aspects of reality. This reality is not restricted to some ill-guided conception of the social in delineation from the natural (Barad, 2007). Rather language is part of a 'naturalcultural' becoming (p. 230). Importantly, the way language is used 'matters' (p. 132) and actively changes phenomena. As Barad points out, people cannot make things happen just by "willing" them into existence through language; there always 'is a sense in which "the world kicks back"' (Barad, 2007: 215). For example, just because I say that my lessons are "dialogic", they automatically become dialogic when they are clearly "teacher centred" and "autocratic". We are 'part of the world' and not simply 'in the world' (Barad, 2007:91) and so is language. Secondly, 'activities' (Gee, 2005:11) could be understood as iterative and intra-active becomings whilst some activities involve humans. This iterative intra-activity sometimes 'stabilizes' (Barad, 2007:191) and becomes intelligible. Through particular material discursive practices, people have developed a shared sense of what certain activities mean and recognise others as engaging in these activities if they speak and act in certain ways (Gee, 2005). Language is one, but not the only intra-acting agency in this intra-activity. Thirdly, 'identities' (p.11), similarly, could be understood as iterative 'matterings' (Barad, 2007:149) which are enacted through language. People act and think in behavioural patterns and believe they have an identity (as an essence), but really just iteratively (and often unknowingly) perform their identity. Identity may appear to be fixed and unchangeable, but there is always the potential to break out of this iterative intra-action. Fourthly, language may help to build or reconfigure *'relationships'* by enacting particular agential cuts which make certain things matter while excluding others from mattering. When I speak to my students, my students and I emerge through this intra-action. Simultaneously, we intra-act (i.e.

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build relationships) with the particular room we are in, with our unique histories, whilst our bodies themselves are filled with further intra-activity (see my previous discussion of neurocognitive processes). Relationships are not simply Euclidian, but topological (i.e. about connectivities and boundaries). By speaking to my students, I enact a boundary – an iterative agential cut - which is the necessary condition for materialising in the way I do. Without these boundaries, there would be no intelligible (human and nonhuman) bodies in the first place. On the other hand, when my students and I both listen to another student, topologies change. In this case, the students and I emerge as the "agencies of observation" who are marked by the speaking student. Relationships are topological matters.

Language may, fifthly, help to build '*politics'* in that language intra-acts with the world by judging whether the distribution of 'social goods' (Gee, 2005:12) is legitimate or illegitimate. When I, for example, say, "Jeff Bezos worked extremely hard to get where he is …" I may actively legitimise extreme wealth whilst only a slight addition, such as, "… but he did not work harder than most other people") delegitimises this inequality. Sixthly, language can create spatial and temporal 'connections' (Gee, 2005:12) whilst "connections" in an agential realist understanding have to be understood as being indissociable from the notion of "relationships" and "boundaries". For example, Barbara made connections by contrasting the current version of student voice to previous examples of student voice before the NSS came into existence. This connection was built by contrasting, i.e. by enacting a boundary (a delineating line, an agential cut) between the past and the present. Seventhly, language may privilege certain 'sign-systems' (Gee, 2005:13) over others whilst these sign systems are themselves iterative material-discursive practices which do not exist outside of intra-action. (That is, the black marks inside a book still exist in that they intra-act with the white paper; however, in order to be intelligible as words they need to intra-act with someone who can read.) That is, people need to engage with each sign system in order to bring it to life (to make it

matter). When I speak in a formal way on a conference and use technical vocabulary (such as "intra-action"), I enact this specific technical sign system whilst this intra-action is also enfolded into my own biographical experiences. In order for these sign systems to be recognised (to become intelligible), I also require a listener who engaged with the same theory (or, alternatively, I need to pedagogically develop this theory so that listeners can engage with it). Sign systems, from an agential realist perspective, are dynamic "becomings" and not static "beings".

This closes this chapter's new materialist discussion. The following chapter now seeks to show how the theories utilised for this thesis resonate with one another.

Chapter 7   Theoretical Diffractions

Building on the previous three chapters, this chapter attempts to diffractively read Foucault's (2009, 2008) governmentality through Laclau's (2005) antagonism and Barad's (2007) agential realism to work towards an integrated (but still diffractive) framework. That is, this chapter delineates the similarities and differences between these respective frameworks and contextualises them against the data utilised in this thesis. This, in return, provides some further insights into the analysis of rating and ranking practices and student feedback systems.

Importantly, relating this back to the methodological considerations in the context of Barad's agential realism, this could be understood as a diffractive reading which attends to some of the diffraction effects when Foucault's, Barad's, and Laclau's frameworks are immersed through one another. Each framework, for example, could be understood as a metaphorical ripple on a pond. When reading all three main theoretical frameworks through one another, it is as if these ripples (i.e. the resultant waves) merged through one another to create an 'interference pattern' (Barad, 2007:77). As mentioned in 6.4.1, an interference pattern has characteristic areas where waves add to one another other (positive interference) or where they subtract from one another (negative interference).

7.1   *Foucault and Barad*

I begin by reading Foucault and Barad through one another. Clearly, there are similarities between both scholars' frameworks, not least because Barad's work builds on some of Foucault's central concepts. For example, as mentioned in 6.2.1, agential realism builds on Foucault's notion of discursive practices by extending these into her neologism of "material-discursive practices" (which she then conflates in her understanding of apparatuses). Moreover, Barad refigures Foucault's (1982) notion of 'power' - as denoting the capacity to change the conduct of

other people - into her understanding of "materialising potential". Power in this sense, is figured as something wider, i.e. as the agency to make "something" appear (e.g. a social action, a disciplined body or an atom).

Since these issues have already been discussed, this section will not repeat these here. Instead, this section will focus on the question of how Foucault's lecture series on governmentality may resonate with Barad's agential realism. Barad's failure to include this lecture series into her 2007 book 'Meeting the Universe Halfway' could probably be attributed to the fact that this lecture series was only available on audio tape at Barad's time of writing. However, there are resonances between both concepts, particularly in their respective foci on "larger scale structures of domination". Both concepts are somehow concerned with how smaller scale and larger scale structures are entangled with one another: i.e. they both interrogate how large structures impact on (and are maintained by) smaller ones. A useful exemplification point can be made when considering Barad's interpretation of Leela Fernandes's (Fernandes, 1997) (Marxist *and* Foucauldian!) ethnographic study in a Calcuttan jute mill and diffracting this work through Foucault's Governmentality. Importantly, Barad argues that Fernandes succeeds in discussing how issues of power on the Jute Mill Factory Floor do not only have implications for what unfolds within the factory, but also have an impact on wider societal matters such as a maintenance of certain capitalist structures of exploitation.

In what follows, I outline Fernandes's (1997, cited in Barad, 2007) depiction of events that unfolded after a weaving machine inside the jute mill factory broke. After the machine stopped working, the weaver, who operated this weaving machine, became anxious because he feared for lost work and wages and hence called a mechanic to fix it. (The broken machine is one example of Barad's take on non-human agency: the machine enacted its agency by changing the material configuration of the work process.) The mechanic, however, arrived rather late which enraged the weaver, resulting in an argument between weaver and mechanic. Consequentially, 'the mechanic injured the

weaver with his hammer, and in the ensuing fight the mechanic was also injured' (Fernandes, 1997:1). When the weaver (together with two further workers from his caste), confronted management, the 'general secretary of the leading trade union' got involved because he felt that his expertise had been undermined (ibid.). In front of a large crowd, one of the workers then pushed the assistant manager who fell 'against a machine' resulting in the four workers being banned from the factory (ibid.). This in return resulted in an ultimatum by the trade union to reinstate the workers within 24 hours. Meanwhile, the mechanic went into hiding because he 'was being hunted by the weaver's caste members' (p. 2). The next day, the union members managed to convince the weavers to strike for one hour. However, because other departments in the mill did not go on strike, this did not result in any real challenge to management.

Barad's (2007) take on this confrontation is that human and non-human agencies were involved. These agencies comprise capital (the lost wages), caste (the weaver and mechanic were from different castes), union politics (the weaver's caste had a strong union) and gender (women were dis-privileged in the factory and did not even figure in this confrontation); machines (the gears of the machine broke down which resulted in the lost wages for the weaver). Importantly, Barad suggests that it is through these conflicts between castes, genders, and trade union affiliations that larger societal factors were kept intact. That is, '[c]aste, gender, and class materialize through, and are enfolded into one another' (Barad, 2007:242). That is, large-scale capitalist structures impacted on the jute mill factory workers but it is also the behaviour of the factory workers themselves which reinforced issues of class, gender, racism and caste politics. This, in return, again fed back into the maintenance of a particular national version of capitalism. In other words, subjects - i.e. the workers - on the shop floor were not only at the receiving end of larger scale capitalist structures, but 'the spatiality of capitalism [was] itself produced through the politics of gender, community, and class and daily contests over the relations of power by those very subjects' (Barad, 2007:236). More specifically,

it is through particular (material-discursive) practices (for example exclusionary practices towards women) that the (male) workers perpetuated class relations at a national level (ibid.). By actively producing what it means to be male and female, the workers (inadvertently) reinforce 'the powers of management' and undermine 'attempts by the unions to successfully intervene in certain class-based-always already gendered-practices of management' (Fernandes 1997, cited in Barad, 2007:236). Barad argues that capitalism is (re)produced through both the 'actions of managers who carve up the production process' as well as 'through the workers' own exclusionary practices…'. Hence 'the exclusionary practices of the workers need to be understood to be part of the technologies of capitalism' rather than separate to these (p. 237). Importantly, 'production is a process not merely of making commodities' (which is reminiscent of a Marxist approach) but also of making subjects, and remaking structures' (which is more of a Foucauldian take on the subject) (p. 238). These processes of production are not static, but are 'continually reworked as a result of human, nonhuman, and cyborgian forms of agency' (p.238).

This resonates with Foucault's work on governmentality (2008,2009) in that local practices of competition for power could be understood as distinct mechanisms of government. For example, neo-liberal governmentality avoids large-scale protests by fostering a rationality which pitches individuals against one another in competitive struggles. Put bluntly, it could be suggested that as long as people are competing with one another (for example, in Fernandes's work, castes, trade unions and genders), they are less likely to rebel against larger structures. Hence, the maintenance of confrontations between these entities could be understood as one of Foucault's governmentalities (that is, technologies of government). This liberal governing by "freedom" - and neo-liberal governing by "competitisation" - is complemented by disciplinary forms of government. Disciplinary power is employed when the neo-liberal games of freedom and competition fail. For example, Lecturer X (see page 143) failed to raise positive student feedback which resulted in disciplinary mechanisms to be employed.

In this case, the awareness of a panoptical gaze was heightened in that Lecturer X realised that he was under surveillance on whether he tried hard to improve student satisfaction. In addition, normalising judgement operated in that Lecturer X was made aware that he was lacking behind other colleagues. As a result, Lecturer X had to be shown how to 'control' his activity (Foucault, 1977:156) (e.g. the module leader showed Lecturer X how to teach a certain subject, what to say and what not say). Lecturer X was made into a docile body which displayed "genetic" characteristics: the action plan which was devised specified precisely when and where to meet - and when these meetings should stop (i.e. an end-point was specified). As discussed in 4.2, the process by which society can be governed can vary from creating competition towards using a disciplinary model.

In summary, Foucault's' governmentality and Barad's agential realism share their focus on how subjectivity at the micro scale (i.e. competitive relations) functions to maintain the operation of larger structures. Yet, Barad's notion of intra-action transcends Foucault's work in one central aspect. Whilst Foucault's work remains firmly anchored in human practices, intra-action describes the process by which *everything* in the universe comes to matter (including entirely non-human aspects on other planets). Governmentality, hence, could be understood as one specific type of intra-action which makes it possible to control large populations. This is schematically visualised in Figure 9.
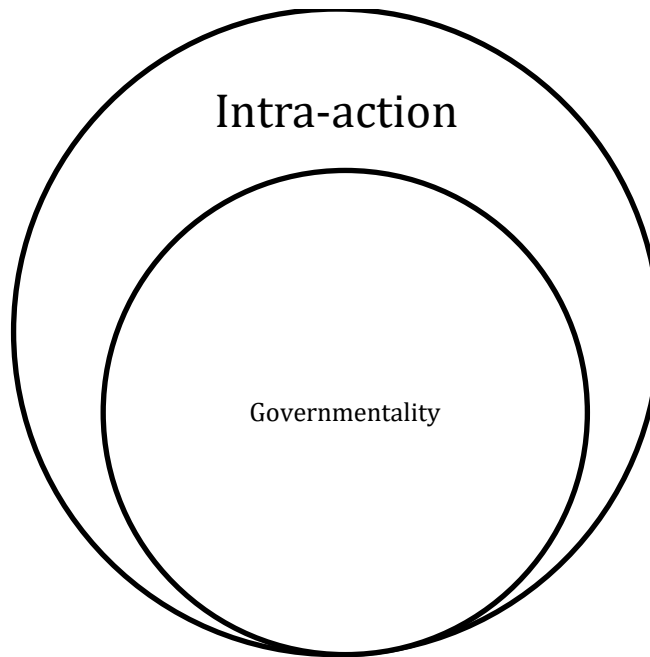
Figure 9: Governmentality as intra-action

7.2 Foucault and Laclau

This section turns to the diffractions which result from reading Laclau's and Foucault's works through one another. Importantly, Laclau (2005) built some of his concepts on Foucault's archaeological work in the context of the notion of a 'discursive formation' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014:91) whilst Foucault's genealogical phase, including the latter's notion of governmentality (Foucault, 2008, 2009), remained underutilised. Foucault's genealogy and Laclau's antagonism resonate in important ways, however. First, as already implied in Chapter 5, antagonism could be figured under Foucault's (later) understanding of "governmentality. As mentioned in Chapter 4, governmentality refers to a range of different "technologies of government", such as discipline, sovereignty, and neo-liberalism. I suggest that antagonism could be understood as just another distinct type of governmentality, i.e. an "antagonistic governmentality". This means that the NSS may simply make use of disparate technologies of government, such as disciplinary, neo-liberal and antagonistic ones which are all designed to govern the academic population. Importantly, this understanding would

also introduce opportunities to theorise how some lecturers feel isolated in the context of their work environment. For example, Melissa suggested that she felt "isolated per se" but that this feeling was exacerbated "when things go wrong", such as a "student complaining on behalf of the entire course".

More specifically, the following (diffractive) argument could be developed: the NSS governs by pitching lecturers against students. That is, students are reframed as an antagonism, i.e. as powerful "customers" of the university who demand "value for money" and a good "student experience". In addition to these antagonistic tendencies, liberal governmentality is at play in that lecturers are "free" to devise innovative strategies to raise positive student feedback. Similarly, neo-liberal governmentality is at play in that lecturers are more likely to compete with colleagues over that feedback. This competition may result in a resentment of colleagues who attain better feedback, but also creates an urgency to improve their feedback.

If things go well, lecturers try to recreate this success. Conversely, if things go badly, lecturers feel pressured to raise better student feedback. This pressure could be of a disciplinary nature. For example, Lisa's colleague who is a module leader disciplined Lecturer X (see page 143) and implemented fine-grained mechanisms to ensure that Lecturer X would be turned into a docile body who knows exactly "what" and "how" to teach whilst being subjected to a (i) panoptical gaze and to (ii) normalising judgement.

Similar to the suggestion that discipline and governmentality might have merged into an amalgamated assemblage (Chapter 4), perhaps antagonism (Chapter 5) needs to be understood along the same lines. That is, discipline (lecturers compare themselves to other lecturers), liberalism (lecturers are "free" to win students' approval), neo-liberalism (lecturers are forced to compete) and antagonism (students are figured as the "enemy") operate simultaneously in the NSS. It is the diffraction of these technologies which creates an atomisation (i.e. isolation) of individual lecturers.
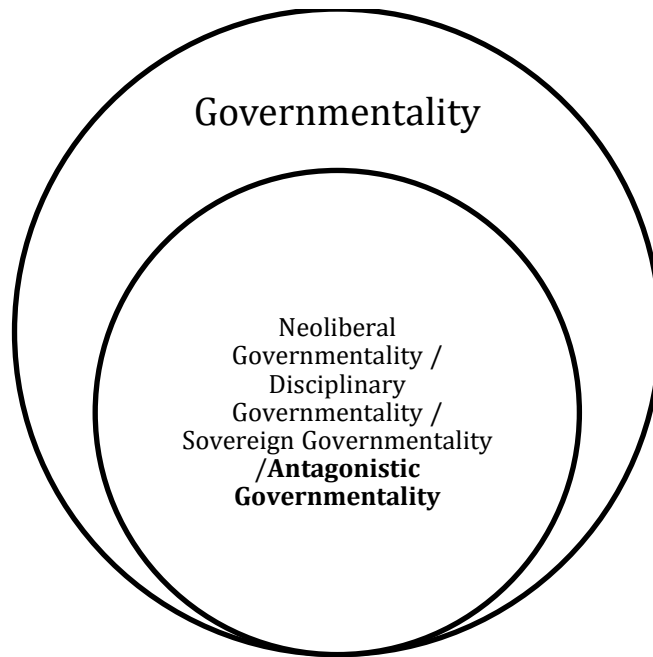
Figure 10: Antagonism as a governmentality

7.3 Barad and Laclau

Despite the fact that Laclau's Postmarxism and Barad's agential realism are often categorised in distinct theoretical fields – with Barad's framework being subsumed under what has come to be known as the new materialisms (Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012) and Laclau's framework being described as postmarxist (Sim, 2000) - a closer inspection of both theorists' works makes visible (almost uncanny) similarities. Hence, the combination of these aspects may allow for a more useful combined analytical tool. Therefore, this section will firstly attend to the difference to then progress to the similarities between both frameworks.

First, there are important differences between Laclau's and Barad's distinct ontological assumptions, most prominently the fact that Barad seeks to theorise nature and culture together whilst Laclau's work clearly draws a dividing line between these two realms. This becomes particularly transparent in Laclau's distinction between the notions of antagonism, real opposition and contradiction which have been outlined in Chapter 5. Revisiting this argument, Laclau begins his discussion by critiquing Lucio Colletti's (1975, cited in Laclau,

2014) ontological assumptions that there are only two mutually exclusive kinds of entities: 'real objects and concepts' (p. 126). In other words, there is a clear 'separation between thought and reality' (p.126). He then suggests adding a third concept: that of antagonism. Antagonism, according to Laclau, functions as an impossible object which operates thus: "I cannot be my ideal self, because you (i.e. the antagonism) hinder me to become that ideal self". Instead of, however, rejecting "real-oppositions" and "contradictions" as distinct principles, he accepts their existence and simply adds antagonism as a separate category. This acceptance, for example, transpires when discussing the notion of real opposition and its distinction from that of antagonism. In real opposition we have two already fully formed objects. Put concisely, 'there is nothing antagonistic in a crash between two vehicles: it is a material fact obeying positive physical laws' (p. 126). Similarly, Laclau cautions us that it would be problematic to equate class struggle with

> 'the physical act by which a policeman hits a worker militant, or the shouts of a group in Parliament which prevent a member of an opposing sector from speaking.' (p. 126)

This is where Barad's framework contradicts Laclau's assumptions. That is, Laclau's assumptions regarding the ontological status of real opposition, indeed, may hold true, but only when thinking inside a *decidedly Newtonian ontology*, an ontology which - as reiterated throughout this thesis – has been challenged by Barad's concept of intra-action. For example, in Newton's framework we encounter independent, fully formed identities which interact with one another whilst in Barad's framework these identities emerge through intra-action because there are no already fully formed entities in the word to begin with! In fact, Laclau's notion of antagonism (which subsequently builds the backbone of his populist theorisations) describes a phenomenon which is much closer to Barad's intra-action than "real opposition" ever could be. The only difference, of course, is that Laclau uses antagonism to describe the processes which emerge in the social world whilst

intra-action presents itself as a more generic blueprint to describe the materialisation of matter in the entire universe. This universe, in Barad's framework, comprises the social (whilst what is "social" and what is "natural" cannot be disentangled).

Discourse. This opens the opportunity to examine some of the parallels between Laclau's and Barad's frameworks. First, there are some striking similarities in Barad and Laclau's understandings of *discourse*. Laclau (2005, 68-69) suggests that 'discourse is the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such'. Importantly, his definition of discourse is not

> 'essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role. This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it.'

In fact, the similarities between Laclau and Barad's understanding are so striking, that the above quote could also have been printed in Meeting the Universe Halfway. That is, at the heart of intra-action is that 'relata do not pre-exist relations' (Barad, 2007, p. 140). In addition, Barad's conception of material-discursive practices resonates with Laclau's version of discourse in that both argue that "discourse" is not restricted to language. Even more importantly – and this part is identical to Barad's work – 'elements' (which equates to Barad's intra-acting agencies) 'do not pre-exist' (Barad, 2007:ix; Laclau, 2005:68) 'the relational complex but are constituted through it' / 'emerge as being part' of their intra-action (Barad, 2007:360). In addition, both Barad and Laclau hold on to a certain conception of "objectivity". Whilst Laclau suggests that '"relation" and "objectivity" are synonymous' (Laclau, 2005:68), Barad similarly figures objectivity in the Bohrian sense of an unambiguous specification of the material and conceptual apparatus. That is, Laclau asserts that 'discourse is the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such' whereas Barad sees material discursive practices as the practices which create objectivity. Even when it comes to Barad's famous assertion that intra-action is not about relations of

pure exteriority (as Manuel DeLanda would argue), but rather – due to the emergent character of intra-acting agencies – about 'exteriority within phenomena (Barad, 2007:340), Laclau provides an almost identical explication of how group identities emerge, namely through the articulation of a demand:

> 'This articulation, however, does not correspond to a stable and positive configuration which could be grasped as a unified whole: on the contrary, since it is in the nature of all demands to present claims to a certain established order, it is in a peculiar relation with that order*, being both inside and outside it'* (Laclau, 2005:ix; emphasis added).

Boundary. Another similarity between both scholars can be found when comparing *Barad's agential cut* and Laclau's *antagonistic frontier.* According to Laclau, antagonism is constitutive. By putting into question 'objectivity as such' (Laclau, 2005:85), Laclau outlines the differences between Saussure's structuralist claims and his notion of antagonism. Whilst Saussure's differences, for instance, 'still presuppose a continuous space without which they [i.e. differences] are, as such, constituted', in Laclau's (2005:85; italics in original) notion of difference, there is no continuous space. Rather, antagonism describes 'a radical frontier' and 'a *broken* space'. The construction of a group identity, such as the people, fully (and not only partially) depends on the antagonistic frontier. Without the antagonistic frontier which separates the "oppressor" from the "oppressed", no group identity of the "oppressed" would be possible. For example, in the context of this thesis, there is no possibility of the emergence of a resentful lecturer identity without the antagonism of students. Both elements are entirely contingent on one another. Moreover, there is no shared student-lecturer identity without the construction of "oppressive policy makers". The antagonistic frontier, in other words, creates objectivity as such. Frontier and group identity emerge simultaneously.

This antagonistic frontier is almost identical to Barad's general logic of intra-action and its accompanying *agential cut*. Intra-action describes the process by which there is no pre-existing matter in this

word. That is, there are no independent particles or other entities, such as a lecturers, electrons, cells or stars. Rather all entities (whether small or large) emerge as part of their intra-action: all matter comes into existence through its intra-action. For example, in experimental settings, there is no such thing as a pre-existing "light particle" or "light wave". Rather, whether light *becomes* a wave or a particle in contingent on the material conditions of the intra-action.

In this sense, both Laclau's antagonistic frontier and Barad's intra-action describe the process by which reality is created as such. In Laclau's version, there is no group identity without an antagonistic force which prevents this group from having their differential demands met: the antagonistic frontier is constitutive of "the people". In Barad's version of intra-action this logic is generalisable to all social – and even further to all phenomena.

7.4   Foucault, Barad and Laclau

This section now provides an integrated reading of Barad's, Laclau's and Foucault's works. A visualisation of this framework is displayed in Figure 11.
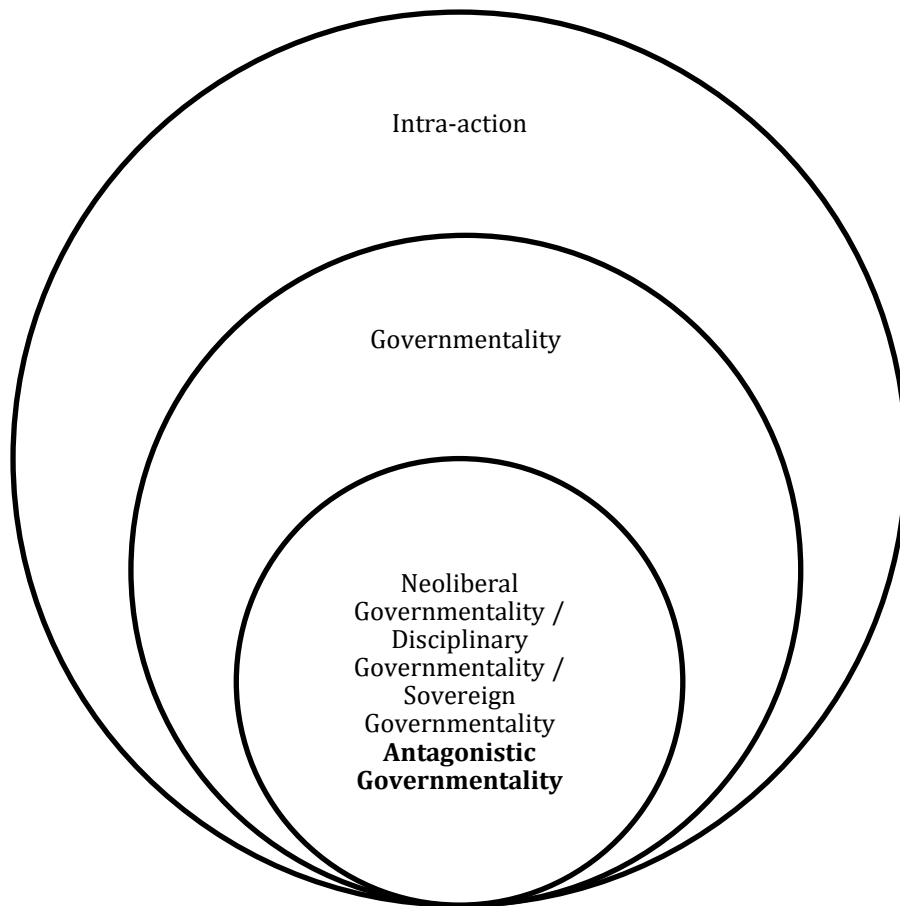
Figure 11: An integrated framework

As can be seen, intra-action is the conceptually largest of notions since it describes all matter in the universe, from the smallest elements towards the largest stars. Governmentality is nested within this as one specific type of intra-action - that is, as one specific material-discursive apparatus of bodily production (see Chapter 4). Governmentality, in itself, describes a technique of government, of which there are many. As argued in Chapter 4, there is not only neo-liberal governmentality, but discipline and sovereign power can also be reframed as governmentalities. To this, as Chapter 5 argued, one further governmentality needs to be added: that of antagonistic governmentality.

Relating this back to the NSS, it could hence be postulated that the NSS is a material discursive apparatus which utilises various enfolded governmentalities. This matters (i.e. it is simultaneously meaningful and has material effects) (Barad, 2007) in that it creates (material) boundaries between lecturers and students and specific anxious lecturer identities. Foremost, these boundaries are iterative (Barad, 2007) – in that they have to be maintained through iterative worrying and other repeated intra-active practices - and antagonistic (Laclau, 2005). These boundaries moreover function as a technology of government - a governmentality (Foucault, 2009) in that they keep lecturers in an antagonistic struggle with students (Laclau, 2005) who iteratively and intra-actively (Barad, 2007) emerge as the antagonistic force (Laclau). Importantly, the NSS is not the only technology which guides university lecturer practice or certain antagonisms between students and lecturers. Entangled with and enfolded into the NSS –as understood in Barad's sense of different scales being folded through one another – are further concurrent technologies, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Ofsted practices (in teacher education). For example, at Lisa's university, competitive logics are facilitated by a practice which is geared towards improving REF outputs. In this process, lecturers can "bid" for hours to improve their REF status whilst people in management positions allocate these hours. In other words, lecturers are pitched in competitive struggles against one another over research hours. Lecturer subjectivities, hence, become competitised (Foucault, 2008). Further entangled technologies shall be considered in the following conclusion 8.3.

Chapter 8   Conclusion

„Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen.[27]" (Adorno, 2018)

The discussion in the previous chapter brings this thesis to its conclusion. This chapter, first, provides a brief summary. Next, the important issue of student voice is approached from a more general perspective. Subsequently, it will be argued that any local version of student voice is severely limited due to larger-scale market and governmental pressures. Therefore, some wider implications of current global issues are considered. It is argued that the NSS is entangled with these macro processes and that future research needs be attentive to these entanglements. Last, I try to outline some limitations of this study as well as resituating the enquiry in the context of my own biography.

8.1   Summary

This thesis sought to enquire into the effects of Student Evaluations of Teaching in the context of the National Student Survey. I started by reviewing the literature on the NSS and SETs more generally. This literature review concluded that the NSS may neither accurately measure student satisfaction, nor may it be capable of meaningfully comparing universities or improving student outcomes. Rather the NSS may produce course deflation, maintain gender biases, and promote contested pedagogies, such as rote memorisation. This raised the question: what are the actual effects of the NSS on lecturer identity and higher education in the UK more generally.

Next, some paradigmatic issues were considered, such as my decision to conceptualise the NSS within a (tentative) realist paradigm. I then outlined my research methods and ethical decisions and discussed notions, such as reflexivity.

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[27] The quote "Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen" is a quote from Adorno's (2018:18) Minima Moralia. It translates to 'Wrong Life cannot be lived rightly' (Adorno, 2005:39).

On this basis, it was then suggested that the NSS functions as a technology of government, i.e. as a governmentality (Foucault, 2009). First, "disciplinary governmentality" was explored (Foucault, 1977). More specifically, it was argued that the NSS governed my participants through what Foucault (1977) referred to as the disciplines, i.e. "hierarchical observation" and "normalising judgement". For example, university lecturers, modules and universities were subjected to (i) "hierarchical observations" by senior management - who instrumentalised students' panoptic gazes - and to (ii) "normalising judgement" in that lecturers, departments and universities were continuously ranked against one another. In addition, discipline operated by closely determining the space, time and interactions of university lecturers, particularly if they failed to achieve positive student satisfaction. As a result, lecturers, departments and universities became "docile", but also "useful" (by aligning themselves with strategic university decisions).

However, discipline as a mode of governing academics did not sufficiently explain some of the other phenomena operational at the universities of this study, including occasional moments of lecturers' perceived "freedom". Hence, Foucault's later work on liberal and neoliberal governmentality was used to make sense of these phenomena. After providing a brief general overview of the concept of "neoliberalism" (without a hyphen) - such as its origins in economic liberalism or its associated phenomena of rising inequality, financial instability, corruption and unethical commercialisation – I then went on to discuss Foucault's delineation of the term. The attempt was made to exemplify how the NSS could be understood as a *liberal* technology of government (by introducing a narrow conception of "freedom" into the art of governing the academic population). In addition, by introducing competition within artificially created quasi markets, it was argued that a distinctly *neo-liberal* element permeates the NSS. It was asserted that university lecturers, courses and universities, become "competitised" and, thus, governable because, put bluntly, lecturers who are in perpetual competition with one another are less likely to challenge larger power structures.

On this basis, it was suggested that the NSS may perhaps constitute a novel combination (an amalgam) of disciplinary and neo-liberal governmentalities. The attempt was then made to view rating and ranking practices as neo-liberal disciplinary hybrids in wider societal contexts. For this purpose, "Nosedive" – an episode of Charlie Brooker's television series Black Mirror - was utilised. In Nosedive, rating and ranking practices have permeated virtually all realms of social life through the use of augmented-reality technology. Whilst this depiction may still seem like science fiction, these trends are already traceable in companies such as "Airbnb" or "Uber" as well as a novel Chinese project which uses a "citizen score" to determine access to certain goods and services.

I then proposed that in the NSS another type of logic is present which I termed "antagonistic governmentality". This notion capitalises on Foucault's notion of governmentality (Foucault, 2009) and combines the latter with Ernesto Laclau's work on populism and antagonism (Laclau, 2005). It was argued that antagonism describes the process of group formation which occurs when people jointly reject another entity. It is then precisely through this rejection that they form their group identity. It was suggested that students may develop a group identity by rejecting their lecturer, and lecturers may develop a group identity by rejecting students. However, going beyond Laclau's specific meaning of antagonism, I proposed that the NSS could be considered an "antagonistic technology" which generates antagonisms between lecturers and students not so much as a strategy which requires (human) energy, but rather automatically, that is akin to a computer algorithm. For example, through the NSS, lecturers situate students as antagonisms due to the latter's artificially created power over the lives of the former. This, importantly, also creates a boundary (which Laclau calls an antagonistic frontier) separating lecturers from students. Connecting this to previous sections in the thesis, lecturers, departments and universities are not only disciplined and competitised, but are also put into a position in which they see students as the "enemy". The most

crucial "side-effect" of this figuring of students as the antagonistic force is, however, that the very technologies which created the antagonisms in the first place (such as the NSS) become increasingly "unintelligible" as the root of the problem. That is, akin to the logic of neo-liberal governmentality which makes lecturers less likely to challenge the status quo because they are too busy competing with one another, antagonisms make lecturers less likely to challenge the status quo because they are too busy resenting students for their perceived power. In other words, antagonism "governs" the (academic) population. Hence, in addition to disciplinary and neo-liberal governmentality, "antagonistic governmentality" governs the academic population through antagonism.

I then argued that it is precisely through the simultaneous working of discipline, competition and antagonism that an "antagonism without populism" emerges. That is, whilst this antagonism should really create connections between lecturers because these begin to jointly reject students (e.g. as "demanding customers"), this connection is sabotaged because lecturers are simultaneously in "competition" with each other. It was therefore hypothesised that the NSS – as a disciplinary, neo-liberal, antagonistic hybrid - systematically undermines attempts of solidarity between students and lecturers whilst simultaneously decreasing the likelihood that policy makers or the "ruling elite" are constructed as the "culprits" behind particular unmet demands. The NSS resonates with the Roman saying, "Divide and Rule": lecturers are divided from lecturers through competition and lecturers are divided from students through antagonism.

Subsequently, a more experimental stance was taken to further deepen the enquiry into the NSS by utilising two "new materialist" frameworks (Iris van der Tuin & Rick Dolphijn et al., 2010). First, Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2016) was discussed as an additional way to systematise the preceding analysis. The NSS was hereby understood as an *assemblage* with specific component parts. These parts, in return, stood in particular disciplinary, neo-liberal

and antagonistic relations towards one another. On the basis that the NSS competitises and simultaneously disciplines and antagonises its subjects (i.e. lecturers), it was established that DeLanda's theory is particularly powerful in theorising how macro and micro levels of scale relate to one another. It was argued that the NSS (as one assemblage) consists of certain component parts (e.g. universities, students and an infrastructure). Importantly, universities, students and infrastructures could be understood as assemblages themselves. Universities contain smaller assemblages (e.g. courses) which contain smaller assemblages (e.g. modules) comprising smaller assemblages (e.g. lecturers) comprising further assemblages (e.g. psychological processes) comprising smaller assemblages (e.g. brain cell clusters) etc. Importantly, DeLanda argues that what makes an assemblage an assemblage is that its component parts interact with one another in characteristic ways. In the context of the NSS, it was therefore argued that interactions between universities are more competitive (they are guided by neo-liberal governmentality) and those between students and universities are more disciplinary (they are guided by disciplinary governmentality). DeLanda's framework was then discussed as particularly apt to show how the NSS *affects its component parts* (such as universities). That is, the NSS makes universities reconfigure *internally* which makes smaller assemblages reconfigure (e.g. modules) which transforms lecturers' interactions which reshapes psychological processes.

Karen Barad's "agential realism" was then utilised to revisit a range of further phenomena, such the increasing boundary creation which appears to coincide with my proposed disciplined and "competitised" lecturer identity. After introducing her work, the NSS was theorised through Barad's suggested simultaneous emergence of matter, boundaries and exclusions. Agential realism suggests that all matter in the universe is in a constant process of "materialisation" through what Barad terms "intra-action". Put bluntly, all material entities in the universe do not exist outside of intra-actions; thus, people (such as lecturers) do not pre-exist their encounters with the world, but rather

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are in a constant process of (ontologically) emerging *out of* these encounters. In other words, it is "encounters" (i.e. intra-actions) between lecturers and students which make lecturers and students materialise in the first place. This materialisation – i.e. the taking shape – coincides through what Barad calls the "agential cut". The agential cut, so to speak, makes the delineating boundaries between bodies (e.g. lecturer bodies and student bodies) intelligible. Barad suggests that for a more permanent boundary to emerge, agential cuts need to become "iterative" (i.e. they need to assume some sense of repetition). This iterativity was captured in lecturers "worrying" (i.e. anxiety as *repetitive* negative thinking) as well as repeated ways of intra-acting with students.

I then utilised another Baradian concepts: that of "enfolding". It was argued that since lecturer anxiety and lecturer/student encounters are "enfolded" into student feedback systems, these encounters develop a somewhat pernicious quality. For example, I discussed that at some point I was worried that a student whom I told off for disrespectful behaviour may in fact take revenge and give me negative feedback in the future. As a result, I materialised as anxious and, hence, as particularly "nice" towards the student in the following session. Macro-scale student feedback systems (e.g. the NSS) could therefore be understood as being 'enfolded through' (Barad, 2007:245) meso-scale institutional practices (e.g. Internal Surveys), my micro-scale encounters with the students, and resultant subpersonal (psychological) processes of "worrying". It was argued that perhaps instead of having a relatively neat "nested model" where subpersonal processes, interpersonal encounters, institutions and nation-states are situated within each other (as is the case with DeLanda's assemblage theory), Barad's work might be more suitable in showing how "topologies" (i.e. boundaries and connectivities) sometimes cut across issues of scale. I concluded, that both issues of scale and issues of topology need to be taken into account because, put simplistically, it matters whether five or 500,000 students resist the NSS.

In what was termed a "paradigmatic interlude", I then discussed some implications of Barad's framework on the research process, i.e. the impact of a Baradian ontology on methodological issues. Next, I argued that there are several weaknesses in Barad's framework, such as the all-encompassing nature of intra-action (which also could be considered a strength) and Barad's anti-representationalism and under-theorisation of language.

Subsequently, a comparison – or using Barad's terminology "a diffractive reading" – was attempted between the main theoretical frameworks of this thesis. First, Barad's and Foucault's work were read diffractively. Whilst Barad made extensive use of Foucault's notion of discursive practices and, to a lesser degree, discipline, Barad failed to utilise Foucault's lecture series on governmentality (Foucault, 2008, 2009). I therefore suggested that "governmentality" may be conceptualised as one specific type of intra-action. Next, Foucault and Laclau were read diffractively. Whilst in "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy", Laclau and Mouffe (2014) draw on Foucault's work, this was limited to Foucault's earlier "archaeological" phase in contrast to his later "genealogical" phase (cf. Gutting, 2006). Thus, I reiterated that antagonism does not only comprise a distinct social operational principle, but rather could be instrumentalised for the purpose of governing a population. In short, the NSS may be an example of an "antagonistic governmentality". Last, the most striking similarities emerged between Laclau and Barad's works. In particular, both author's definitions of discourse (Laclau, 2005) and material-discursive practices (Barad, 2007) displayed almost uncanny resemblances, including their agreement that people do no pre-exist relationships. In summary, it was argued that intra-action is the most general conceptual category; Foucault's notion of governmentality then becomes one mode of intra-acting at both macro and micro levels of scale (governmentality, according to Foucault, connects the practice of governing a whole population with the technologies of the self (i.e. self-control)). As a next step, four governmentalities could be identified: sovereign governmentality, disciplinary

governmentality (Foucault, 1977), neo-liberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008) and, as a novel contribution, antagonistic governmentality (Laclau, 2005). As a result, lecturers (i) become increasingly resentful towards students (whilst larger scale issues, such as the NSS, are less likely to appear as the real source of their unmet demands) (antagonism); (ii) compete with other lecturers over student feedback (neo-liberalism); and, if this competition fails to raise student feedback, lecturers (iii) may be subjected to more fine-grained disciplinary practices. When viewed from these multiple angles, the NSS transpires as a technology which promotes an increasing atomisation of university lecturers. Put concisely, the NSS could be understood as a material-discursive apparatus which competitises, disciplines and creates antagonisms *without* creating connectivities. This analysis now opens a range of further questions and lines of enquiry which will be discussed in what follows.

8.2   The Future of Student Feedback

There is a central issue which has not yet been adequately discussed in this thesis, but which, nevertheless, is of crucial importance. It concerns the danger *of positing students as seemingly all-powerful actors within the field of UK higher education*. Such a view would mistakenly neglect the multitude of further disciplinary and neo-liberal assemblages within higher education, including those which figure students at the receiving end of disciplinary technologies, such as perpetual student assessment regimes (Raaper, 2016). Hence, rather than seeing student feedback assemblages in isolation, I suggested that there is the need to seek an understanding of how these assemblages interact with other (disciplinary/neo-liberal/antagonistic) assemblages, including the effects of this interaction (intra-action) on all stakeholders at universities. For instance, I argued that this interaction may occur in the shape of a perpetual and reciprocal disciplining cycle (see page 145) in which students discipline university lecturers (through Student Evaluations of Teaching) and lecturers discipline students (through

conventional means of testing and examinations). This, as was shown, was another "theme" which emerged from my initial observational data, namely that students spent a significant amount of time in their seminars straying off task by expressing how worried they were about their assignments. Assignments are clearly disciplinary (after all, Foucault (1977) called the combination of normalising judgement and hierarchical observation the "examination"). When students are judged on their academic performance, they are judged on a scale from 0-100 (normalising judgement) and this observation is top down (hierarchical observation). Hence, lecturers rate students (in assignments) and students rate lecturers (in student evaluations of teaching). Again, I argued that this reciprocal disciplining (and the resultant reciprocal antagonisms) mirror what is found in Airbnb practices where both apartment host and guests rate one another. This, yet again, resonates with the saying Divide and Rule. Perpetual, reciprocal assessments divide students and lecturers.

In addition, students are forced to compete with one another in the "employment market" after graduation. In other words, students (similarly to lecturers) find themselves at the receiving end of a perpetual competitisation as characteristic of Foucault's understanding of neoliberal governmentality. Furthermore, many students are also subjected more harshly to other effects of neoliberalism (without a hyphen). For example, both lecturers and students face an increasingly uncertain employment future (Lopes and Dewan, 2014). Further complexity emerges when vocational degrees are added into the analysis. For example, Ofsted appraisals of universities in the context of UK initial teacher education (MacBeath, 2011) could be understood as a further disciplinary assemblage in which discipline filters down the university hierarchy with students at the receiving end. In short, these technologies are entangled and cannot fully be understood without acknowledging this entanglement.

I would now like to draw the following analogy. Since I frequently commute into work on overcrowded trains, I suggest that the relationship between lecturers and students under technologies, such as the

NSS, assessment practices, and Ofsted regimes, is a little bit like the relationships between passengers on an overcrowded train. I frequently observe people getting frustrated with this lack of space. Instead of, however, blaming the train company for refusing to provide further compartments, people's frustration, at times, appears to be directed at their fellow passengers for "deciding to travel at the same time". Similarly, under the technologies discussed in this thesis, lecturers, students and managers may begin to blame one another for their lack of creative space (and time) whilst forgetting the structural origins of their competitive and antagonistic behaviour.

This now raises the question what a non-disciplinary, non-antagonistic, non-governmental student feedback could look like. Is there the possibility of meaningful student feedback with the agency to change institutional practice without engaging in the governing of *any* stakeholder? After all, it could be maintained that it is not student feedback which is the problem, but the managerialist, competitive and disciplinary fashion in which it is currently instigated and maintained at many universities across the world (Deem, 1998; Winter, 2009). Perhaps this would necessitate the provision of democratic platforms that are safe from threats of lecturer redundancy (or low student grades) and in which a much more direct voicing of student (dis)satisfaction is possible. These platforms may open spaces in which students and lecturers can engage in genuine debates on how to best structure higher education instead of disciplining one another within pyramidal and competitive power structures.

One such version of student feedback is presented by Fielding (2004), who, writing before the implementation of the NSS, argues for a more dialogic orientated approach to student voice. In this dialogic approach, it is not so much about whether students actually get their "voice" across - i.e. it is not about whether students speak for themselves – but rather, student voice's liberating potential lies in the *act of speaking* (particularly to those in power).

It could be suggested, however, that this dialogic approach could only succeed if it was implemented beyond the current NSS model.

Again, this would require a re-evaluation of the power imbalances inherent in summative assessment practices where a (more powerful) person (i.e. a lecturer) judges the quality of the work of a (less powerful) one. In short, it could be suggested that abolishing student satisfaction surveys, such as the NSS, whilst maintaining top-down assessment practices may rightfully be considered unfair[28].

8.3   The NSS as Part of Global Issues

This then raises questions regarding the opportunities of resisting or transforming the disciplinary-neo-liberal-antagonistic effects of student appraisals and other technologies. Whilst some authors have suggested that it is still possible to resist certain developments at the institutional level (Gonzales, 2015:303) in the shape of critiquing and resisting strategic university decisions, the possibilities for agency may, indeed, be severely limited precisely due to larger scale issues, such as market pressures between universities. This limitation poignantly transpired when I, in a recent team meeting, was asked what my stance on the NSS results were:

> *Recently, we had a meeting about the NSS scores for our course and I was asked to give my opinion, considering that my thesis was about the NSS. In retrospect, my answer really disappointed me. I mumbled something about that obviously the whole issue regarding the NSS is very complex, but that my answer would probably be twofold. I somewhat continued, "On the one hand there's this dimension that the NSS does not tell us anything, it does not improve provision for students, may lead to grade inflation in that lecturers give better marks to receive better feedback and it might actually be bad for course quality because lecturers make it easy so students don't struggle. It's also actually quite pernicious in lots of ways: students may even give better student feedback to lecturers who they perceive to be good looking." … I then went back and said, "On a general level, the NSS is really problematic because it's part of a neoliberal agenda. Yet, this does not alter the fact that we as a department are under massive competitive pressures." Afterwards, I asked myself, is this really the best I can do? … (Excerpt 57. My research diary)*

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[28] Then yet again, there appears to be a more profound contradiction at play here which concerns the question of what would happen to universities' role of quality assuring degrees which may involve high stakes (e.g. medical degrees, nursing degrees)

Despite my disappointment with my own "advice" regarding the NSS, this spontaneous narrative may entail a certain "truth" about the NSS. That is, although I felt rather unhappy about my response due to its lack of any positive counter-strategy at the institutional level and its unsatisfactory and compliant demand for "playing the game", my answer perhaps touched on one important issue: that of large-scale competitive pressures. In short, any local response which seeks to resist market technologies, such as the NSS, may be severely limited because this localism keeps inter-university market pressures and wider effects of neoliberalism untouched (Srnicek & Williams, 2016). The following fictional scenario could be invented. University A decides that it will completely ignore the NSS by, for example, ceasing to allocate internal resources to the attainment of high student satisfaction. Consequently, no Internal Surveys would be administered and no lecturers would be tasked with the job of analysing, evaluating and drawing conclusions from NSS scores for further strategic consideration. Lecturers would still meet with student representatives but engage in a "democratic" dialogue with students as suggested above (Fielding, 2004). (The possibility that this lack of satisfaction surveys may unexpectedly lead to an increase in student satisfaction scores will, for the sake of the argument, not be considered.) For now, it shall be assumed that as part of this democratic dialogue it may also come to frictions between students and the course which, in return, result in a decline in NSS scores. From here, further events may unfold: the decline in NSS scores may lead to a decline in league tables, leading to fewer students choosing university A, leading to less funding through tuition fees.

This also shows how the raising of tuition fees and associated withdrawal of government funding is fundamentally connected to the NSS – in Baradian (2007) terms it could be suggested they are "entangled". For example, if universities were not as dependent on students' tuition fees as is currently the case, this might also affect leadership decisions, such as relegating the primacy of student voice to a lower agenda item. Since universities, however, rely on tuition fees as

one of their main funding sources, the pressures of recruiting enough students are profound. For example, Lisa remarks:

> *At our university, the whole summer was spent on trying to recruit more students to our programs. It may have to do with the fact that we are a "recruiting" university and not a "choosing university". However, the amount of resources allocated to securing places for further students was immense this summer. We continued to receive emails (weekly!) updating us on the current recruitment status. I am seriously wondering how these recruitment pressures clash with choosing excellent student teachers. Surely, when you are so reliant upon students' money, you may sometimes allow students to become teachers who may not be the best teachers for the children. (Excerpt 58. Lisa's research diary)*

Put concisely, I suggest that "inter-university competition" decreases "intra-university agency".

Hence, it could be suggested that meaningful change may only be effected by larger-scale reconfigurations. If, for example, tuition fees were abolished – i.e. if universities were again solely funded by the Government - this may also affect the status of the NSS. That is, the NSS may either (a) lose its impact on universities (it may lose its "materialising power" (Barad, 2007) or disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977)) if money was paid to universities *regardless* of their student satisfaction ratings. On the other hand, in an opposite version, the Government may (b) make university funding *contingent* on NSS scores. That is, in this "hyper neo-liberal" scenario (in Foucault's understanding of the term), the state may use student feedback to decide how much money would be allocated to universities which, in return, would exacerbate (and not ease) inter-university market pressures.

However, even the changes depicted in scenario (a) may still not go far enough since the NSS, of course, is part of broader international developments. For example, the two universities in this study are not only part of a "national ranking market", but also part of an "international" one. Lisa writes:

> *It is one of our university's distinct goals to attract more international students at the moment. We seem to be lacking behind other universities in this. International students also pay more money. (Excerpt 59. Lisa's research diary).*

International rankings may attract increasing numbers of international students who pay higher tuition fees than domestic or EU students. This also appears relevant at a national level, captured in the DfB's assertion that 'graduates are central to [the UK's] prosperity and success as a knowledge economy, and higher education is a key export sector (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016, DfB:9). In other words, it is of national interest to attract money into the country in exchange for exporting "accreditations". This focus on export is reminiscent of Foucault's (2009) description of mercantilist politics which sought to attract gold in exchange for grain.

Further analogies can be drawn. Just as universities are somewhat powerless in an artificially produced competitive market (as is the case through the NSS), at a larger scale, countries may also be increasingly impotent in effecting any profound *internal* change. It could even be suggested that nation-states are increasingly reconfigured as "large-scale companies" which seek to maximise profits by attracting capital from other countries. This relative impotence of individual countries in an international competitive market guided by internationally free-roaming capital was poignantly expressed in 2015 when Greece decided, based on a referendum, to refuse to pay bailout money to its creditors (who comprised a mixture of German banks, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB)). This referendum was ignored, and the imposed austerity continued. Alongside this development, capital rapidly escaped Greece due to the fear of a banking collapse. In other words, in a world where capital can be moved freely with no effective international oversight and regulation of these money flows (Piketty, 2014), countries may, in effect, be considered oversized companies which operate within a global market (just as universities are reconfigured as companies in a "student satisfaction market").

I suggest that it is here where my new materialist discussion (Chapter 6) may add some further analytical insights. For example, returning to DeLanda (2006), whilst assemblages may differ in size,

the *relations* between their respective component parts may be identical. For instance, the logic of competition remains the same regardless of whether individuals compete with other individuals, universities compete with other universities or, in fact, countries compete with other countries. Hence, the example of Greece not only demonstrated that the interests of German banks appear to outweigh national democratic processes, but that - just as at a smaller scale, universities may be powerless against inter-university competition – nation-states may be somewhat powerless against "inter-national" competition and associated capital streams.

It becomes increasingly clear that it is only one further analytical step to propose that not only people, courses and universities are the subjects of disciplinary-neo-liberal-antagonistic governmentalities, but that nation-states are. More specifically, the following DeLandian (2006) model could be proposed: the assemblage "Earth" contains a myriad (natural and social) component parts, such as oceans, landmasses and countries which interact in specific ways. First, as a result of neoliberal globalisation, countries (or *governmental* (!) organisations, such as the EU) are in "competitive relations" with other countries. Interestingly, at this global level, these competitive relations may, again, be systematised by rankings (e.g. *World Competitiveness Ranking 2018*, 2018) and ratings (e.g. Moody's (Reuters, 2017)), just as at the national level competition is systematised by the NSS and the TEF. As a result of this competitive pressure, countries internally reconfigure (i.e. as argued in 6.1 assemblages can affect the identity of its components). This reconfiguration may be embodied in legislation which seeks to attract capital from other countries (e.g. "tax breaks for investors", "advertising campaigns to attract more international students") or in the implementation of further *internal governmentalities* (e.g. the NSS). That is to say, because there are external competitive pressures between countries, these countries respond by "copying" those *external* competitive relations into their *internal* policymaking. In DeLanda's terminology, due to the competitive "relations of exteriority"

between countries, these countries internally configure, by implementing *internal* competitive interactions between their respective component parts. This process could be firstly captured in a "top-down" causal structure. Put crudely, because the UK is governed by (*external*) international competition, the UK Government governs its component parts to compete with one another on ranked scales *internally*. For example, universities compete with other universities (in the NSS, REF, etc.), schools compete with other schools (e.g. in league tables (Richardson and Sellgren, 2018)), and hospitals with other hospitals (e.g. National Institute for Health Research, *NIHR, 2018). These assemblages, yet again, force their components (e.g. university modules, school year groups, hospital departments) to compete with one another (e.g. in Internal Survey rankings, year group performance rankings, patient satisfaction rankings). In return, these assemblages may promote competition between their respective components (e.g. lecturers informally compete in Student Representative Meetings (SRMs), teachers may compete with one another over the progress of their pupils, and nurses may be competing over popularity with patients). Second, in a bottom-up fashion, it could be suggested that individuals become competitive, so that their departments become competitive, so that their organisations become competitive, so that their countries become competitive. In short, neoliberal globalisation may be understood as a global, hierarchical assemblage which governs by creating competition at all levels of scale through normalising judgement and panoptical rankings. In addition, I suggest that competition and antagonism work alongside one another. For instance, a school class may develop its identity on the basis of a rejection (an antagonism) towards another class. A school may develop its own identity through its antagonism towards another school. A country may develop its own identity (in this case nationalism) based on its rejection of another country.

In addition, Barad's (2007) work is useful in showing how this current neoliberal globalised capitalism is not only to be understood in this

neat nested model. Rather, it could be described as a 'topological an-imal' that constantly 'mutates through an open-ended dynamics of in-tra-activity' (p. 240). That is, there are distinct topological relationships which pierce through any nested model in that, for example, a lecturer in the UK may be competing with another in the US, whilst my univer-sity may compete with another university in India, thereby traversing 'bodily [state] boundaries' (Barad, 2007:155; word added to suit anal-ysis).

This discussion now raises a distinctly modern question. Can is-sues at the local level be addressed without also addressing issues at the global level? At the danger of sounding increasingly utopian, I ask whether the only way to counter-act this tendency of global govern-mentality is to establish an "international contract" which replaces global competition (as for example enshrined in World Bank law) with global cooperation. This question, in return, is connected to even larger "planetary" issues, which may, in fact, spell the end of our cur-rent "civilisation", such as global environmental degradation and rising inequality (Motesharrei et al., 2014).

Whilst a more thorough exploration of these issues would clearly go beyond the scope for this thesis, I only schematically touch upon the crucial issue of "rising wealth inequality" and then suggest how this connects to my arguments as presented in this thesis. Thomas Piketty's "Capital in the 21st century" problematises this global phe-nomenon of increasing *wealth inequality.* Piketty asserts that capital, if left to itself and not redistributed, tends to accumulate without match-ing gains of productivity. For example, 'Liliane Bettencourt', before her death, owned thirty billion Euros whereas 'her declared income was never more than five million a year' despite interest endowing her with an annual sum of roughly 500 million Euros (p. 525). This amount can-not be easily spent in a year. Therefore, ultra-wealthy people allow

> 'the remainder of the turn on one's capital to accumulate in a family trust or other ad hoc legal entity created for the sole purpose of man-aging a fortune of this magnitude, just as university endowments are managed'. (p. 525)

This "capital accumulation without labour" produces the issue that economic growth increasingly lags behind "return on capital". In other words, because capital is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small minority (i.e. the millionaires and billionaires of this world), the global return on this capital (e.g. the interest this capital produces if, for example, simply kept on a bank account) is increasingly larger than the economic global growth. The fact that 'capital reproduces itself faster than output increases' (p. 571) is highly problematic not only because economic growth slows down, but also because the rising inequality may be 'potentially threatening to democratic societies' (p. 571). As a remedy against this process, Piketty suggests a 'progressive annual tax on capital' (p. 572). Importantly, consistent with my argument above, this capital tax 'it is not within the reach of the nation-states' (p. 573), but only possible if instantiated on a global level or, if not possible, at least at a transnational (e.g. European) one. This wealth tax, in return,

> 'will make it possible to avoid an endless inegalitarean spiral while preserving competition and incentives for new instances of primitive accumulation' (p. 572).

I suggest that this inequality also enables governmental technologies, such as the NSS to work more effectively. That is, precarity may function as a pre-condition for the governmentalities suggested in this thesis to work in the first place. Returning to the NSS, the following hypothetical scenario could be used as an explication. "Lecturer A is rated poorly by students. This rating has a slightly negative emotional effect on her because she thought the course "was going really well". Because of the negative rating, her manager invites her in for a performance review. In this review, Lecturer A is given a warning that she should try to improve her teaching (i.e. raise better student feedback) in the future. As a result, Lecturer A tries really hard to attain better student feedback: she becomes docile and competitive." The same scenario shall now be considered with only one minor change: more secure employment rights (which are increasingly hollowed out under

current neoliberal policies). In this scenario, Lecturer A still receives poor student feedback, still is invited in for a meeting, still may even be given a warning; however, this warning lost its cutting edge simply because Lecturer A knows that she cannot be made redundant easily. In fact, on the premise of stronger employment rights, it is highly doubtful that superior managers may even be in a position where they could "invite colleagues in and make threats". On this basis, the following logic could be postulated: the more precarious the situation of a lecturer (or employee), the more power (used in Barad's sense of "materialising potential") governmental technologies, such as the NSS, have. Put differently, threats lose their cutting edge when there is no perceived realistic chance of putting these threats into action.

This also resonates with recent suggestions to strengthen the bargaining power of employees through a reduction of the workweek or a universal basic income (Srnicek and Williams, 2016). Srnicek and Williams argue that these two demands are paramount if humanity wants to avoid what neoliberal capitalism appears to be currently heading towards: a precarious future devoid of work and increasingly susceptible to fascist, racist and misogynistic tendencies. Whilst being broadly associated with what has come to be known under the umbrella of "accelerationism" (Mackay and Avanessian, 2014), Srnicek and William's (2016) vision of the future is a distinctly left-wing anti-neoliberal (but not anti-globalisation) project. Interestingly, this project demands "full automation" (instead of rejecting it), arguing that automation cannot be stopped (Artificial Intelligence (AI) may, in fact, 'outperform humans in all tasks in 45 years' and may automate '*all* human jobs in 120 years …' (Grace et al., 2017:729; emphasis added)). Crucially, this automation needs to, however, be accompanied by a reduction of the workweek – which would increase employee bargaining in that employers would no longer be able to threaten to "employ somebody else" (as outlined above) – and a "universal basic income". Fundamental to Srnicek and Williams's (2016) accelerationist project is the creation of an ecology of institutions, seeking to develop 'utopian narratives' (p. 136) so as to 'wrench open a new horizon of possibility' (p.

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139) which in return is able to critique present conditions. In the context of the NSS, further research could, hence, investigate utopian questions, such as, "What would the future of higher education look like without the current disciplinary, neo-liberal and antagonistic governmentalities embodied in various technologies, such as the NSS?" or, "How do broader utopian ideas (such as a post-work society) reconfigure higher education (including the NSS)?"

8.4   Some Final Remarks

In conclusion, I suggest that, like much academic work, this thesis feels unfinished and, in many respects, limited in its enquiry regarding issues of student feedback and voice. Whilst it may provide a novel view on student voice through the utilisation of theory which had not been used in this context before (i.e. Foucault, Laclau, DeLanda and Barad), it left a range of issues unaddressed. First, the data used for this thesis was clearly limited. Further research could mobilise a larger data set from a broader mix of universities, containing a more substantial proportion of Ancient and Russel Group universities. The pressures faced by these types of universities may be significantly different (e.g. more research pressures, fewer teaching pressures) which might be linked to their prestige and resultant status as "choosing universities" (in comparison to post-92 universities as "recruiting universities"). Whilst this thesis eschewed the utilisation of quantitative methods, perhaps this larger data set would have enabled a mixed-methods approach to data evaluation.

In addition, some questions had to be omitted due to word-count restraints. For example, earlier versions of this thesis linked student voice to Lacanian theory, in particular his notion of the "four discourses". It was argued that student feedback systems may create what could be called a hysteric-docility-utility – "hysteric" (as one of Lacan's discourses) because lecturers may never be quite sure what students actually want from them in their feedback. Secondly, it would

have been interesting to explore more deeply, various alternative conceptions of student voice (in fact, a whole chapter could have been dedicated to this, instead of simply incorporating this into the conclusion).

Lastly, various other theories presented themselves as good alternatives to the new materialist (and perhaps overtly "fashionable") theory used in this thesis. For example, actor-network theory may have been a useful addition to DeLanda and Barad's theory. In addition, Marxist/Vygotskian inspired CHAT theory appeared to already address many "New Materialist" issues, including an incorporation of language and matter. Further research could explore these connection points. Last, an interesting enquiry would have been to explore some seminal theory, such as Marx's Capital in the context of Barad's theory. That is, at one point, I found myself reading sections of Das Kapital, and the agency which was attributed to machines could have been copied verbatim out of Barad's (2007) Meeting the Universe Halfway.

In conclusion, I would like to make a few personal comments. First, of course, this thesis was deeply situated in my own - perhaps slightly naïve - investment in the hope for a better future. I believe that this hope, in return, is rooted in my own experiences growing up in neoliberal Western Europe and experiencing first-hand the pressures that are associated with this experience, such as the ruthless all-encompassing competition which was palpable at school, university and in part-time jobs. On the other hand, whilst studying, I witnessed various protest movements which sought to make a difference at the local level, including (successful) protests against the introduction of tuition-fees in Germany. This experience of protest was accompanied by my own attempts to survive on money which I solely made from playing music in pubs. Still, my position was privileged in that my late grandparents paid for renting a room in a flat-share whilst I only had to earn the money for food. In short, the hardships which I may have experienced shrink in comparison to those in worse-off situations.

This returns my discussion to neoliberalism. Whilst neoliberalism affects each person, institution or geographic locality differently, there still is an over-riding commonality in that it makes the majority of people worse-off (cf. Brown, 2015). This decline of living standards may be expressed differentially in rising homelessness (or bleak and hazardous living conditions in the slums and favelas of this world) for the most vulnerable members of society, or may mean that more privileged people work for 'longer hours for less pay' and 'less security' (Brown, 2015:29). Neoliberalism seems to only benefit a select few, with recent statistics estimating that a plane-full of billionaires own as much wealth as the rest of the world population (Elliot, 2016). This inequality is neither good for the economy (Piketty, 2014), nor does it raise everyone's living standards. Hence, it is my deep desire that humanity manages to accelerate into a better future, which, in my view, entails a version where wealth inequality, racism, sexism, homophobia and "general nastiness" are less prevalent. In this sense, I desire something thoroughly modern and utopian: an extension of, what some may consider well-worn, notions of freedom, equality and global solidarity. It is my hope that this thesis represents a little contribution towards what has been recently described as the urgent necessity of building an international alternative to neoliberal capitalism or, even more worryingly, against exacerbating tendencies on the far-right.

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